

## Democracy (and Science) in Translation. Interview with Frederic C. Schaffer

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## Democracy (and Science) in Translation. Interview with Frederic C. Schaffer

Vertimo svarba demokratijoje (ir moksle). Interviu su Frederic  
C. Schaffer Interview conducted by Rosita Garškaitė<sup>1</sup>

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Frederic Charles Schaffer is a professor of political science at the University of Massachusetts Amherst where he teaches about the language of politics and democracy. He also teaches ethnographic methods at the Institute for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research hosted by Syracuse University (NY) and how to work with concepts in the social sciences at the Workshops on Social Science Research hosted by Concordia University and the European Consortium for Political Research Winter School in Bamberg, Germany. Schaffer is the chair of Interpretive Methodologies and Methods Conference Group at American Political Science Association and a board member of Committee on Concepts and Methods at International Political Science Association.

Among his publications: *Democracy in Translation: Understanding Politics in an Unfamiliar Culture* (1998), *Elections for Sale: The Causes and Consequences of Vote Buying* (2007), *The Hidden Costs of Clean Election Reform* (2008), and *Elucidating Social Science Concepts: An Interpretivist Guide* (2016).

**Could you please tell about your background in general: what ideas, books, people shaped your path to political science?**

As an undergraduate student I had already become interested in the methodology of social science, especially in post-positivist ways of doing it, that I later came to call interpretivism. I decided to become a political scientist, because there was a particular person in a Political Science Department at Berkeley where I have been accepted into a PhD program – Hanna Pitkin. I wanted to study with her, because she had written a book *Wittgenstein and Justice: On the Significance of Ludwig Wittgenstein for Social and Political Thought*<sup>2</sup> which really nourished my own thinking about social science and the ways in which it could be done with humility and with the possibility of escaping a lot of the traps that I saw many authors falling into. Her focus on language really tapped into my own interest in it that I had developed by living in different parts of the world and spending a lot of time learning various languages. As a young adult I had lived in Norway, Finland, Senegal, France, and Israel.

**I think her book *The Concept of Representation*<sup>3</sup> can be known for some Lithuanian readers, what are her main ideas relevant to political science that influenced you so greatly?**

*The Concept of Representation* was her first book based on her dissertation. Her contribution was to show that the tools of ordinary language philosophy could be brought to bear on questions important to political theory. By conducting ordinary language analysis of the ways in which the word 'representation' is used not only in everyday talk but also by various political thinkers, she showed us how we can get a better grasp on what the concept of representation means, what representation actually is.

*Wittgenstein and Justice* drew broader lessons about the ways in which we can use ordinary language philosophy. One of the questions that she asked is: what are the implications of this kind of Wittgensteinian understanding of language and social practice for social science? Pitkin suggested that instead of thinking of language as something that we need to correct or reconstruct to serve our analytic ends, we can actually take language itself as an object of investigation. We can learn a lot by looking at language. I thought that this way of thinking about language was really interesting and I took this basic insight and tried to see whether I could do ordinary language philosophy ethnographically, whether I could go out and interview people in a way that would yield the kind of insights that ordinary language philosophy would yield.

Pitkin and many people who have drawn upon her work are in the subfield of political theory. I work in comparative politics and am not the only one of her students who has tried to learn something from her and apply that knowledge to other subfields of political science. Perhaps her best-known students are David Laitin, now at Stanford University, and Lisa Wedeen at the University of Chicago.

**Would you say that a kind of linguistic turn happened in political science with Pitkin and her students?**

I think for a long time there has been a lot of interest in language, but much of that interest came from people working within the positivist tradition. There is a long history of political scientists writing about concepts. So that is not new, but you are right about increased interest in language from post-positivist scholars. For them the work of Hanna Pitkin has proven to be very important along with that of people like Charles Taylor and Clifford Geertz, among others.

**I've just realized that next year will mark 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Taylor's seminal essay *Interpretation and the Science of Man*<sup>4</sup>.**

Yes, it is incredibly important for those of us who work within the interpretivist tradition. There is just so much in there of value. In that essay Charles Taylor, crucially in my view, draws attention to language. So, this attention to language comes from multiple scholars who are standing on the shoulders of previous scholars who came before them. Not everybody became interested in language via Wittgenstein, there were others.

**Let's stick to Wittgenstein. For example, his famous quote that everyone knows "limits of my language mean the limits of my world." If a social scientist takes it seriously, what does it mean then to his or her inquiry?**

I want to add another, less well-known quote: "Language is not a cage." How do we put these two together? On the one hand, Wittgenstein is saying that the language we use grows up together with our practices. So it is interwoven and inseparable from the lives that we live. Our language is tethered to our world and can't transcend it in just any kind of way. However, language is also not a cage. We innovate in our social practices and we innovate in our language. We are constantly developing new language games that correspond to our new practices in the world. The language that we use in doing things is constantly morphing and changing and we can inflect words with new meaning. Language both constitutes our world and is a tool that we can use to remake our world. I think that the second quote "the language is not a cage" is often overlooked when people think about Wittgenstein. I think he is less conservative, with regard to change, than people sometimes are wont to believe.

**Quentin Skinner has said that Wittgenstein instructed him and other scholars interested in history of ideas "to think about the use of language."**

Absolutely right. Just like Hanna Pitkin was very influenced by Wittgenstein – and also by John Austin, another ordinary language philosopher – so was Quentin Skinner. In fact, Skinner was probably more influenced by Austin, especially his book *How to Do Things with Words*<sup>5</sup>. Skinner built on Austin's book by thinking about texts as carrying illocutionary forces, as speech acts. He took the insights of ordinary language philosophy and applied them in a different kind of way, only partially overlapping with the kind of work that Hanna Pitkin does. It shows the range of influences that ordinary language philosophy has had especially in political theory.

**Could you elaborate more on Austin who is also important to your own research?**

There was a kind of rivalry between Austin and Wittgenstein, so Austin never acknowledged how deeply he was influenced by Wittgenstein. We see that influence in the series of lectures that Austin gave at Harvard which were put together to form the book *How to Do Things with Words*. In the first part of the book, Austin notices that there are certain verbs that perform actions rather than describe them. When you say 'I do' in a marriage ceremony you're performing the act of marriage not describing it. Austin tries to figure out how can we distinguish cleanly between performative and descriptive language, but at the end of the first half of the book, he says that he cannot find a way to make that clean distinction. After reading Wittgenstein, he figured out why he couldn't and he abandoned that whole project of trying to find a clear distinction between performative language and descriptive language. He concluded that in fact all language is performative – whenever we speak, we are doing things. This conclusion is a direct translation of the Wittgensteinian

idea of language games into Austinian philosophical vocabulary. In Austin's language, we always need to look at the illocutionary forces – the intentions of the speaker – and the perlocutionary effects – actual consequences of what is said.

**Are there any other giants on whose shoulders you are standing as a researcher?**

Besides Hanna Pitkin there was another person on my dissertation committee who influenced me a lot – cognitive scientist George Lakoff and his work on categories and metaphors. I highly recommend his book *Metaphors We Live By* <sup>6</sup> for anybody who uses language, which means all of us (*laughs*). Some of Lakoff's ideas can also be traced back to Wittgenstein's understanding of family resemblances. It is another example of the influence that ordinary language philosophy has had in the social sciences.

The political scientist James Scott at Yale University was influential for me too, in particular two of his early books: *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* <sup>7</sup> and *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* <sup>8</sup>. Really interesting to me was his own attentiveness to language. For instance, his noticing in *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* that peasants can have understanding of justice that are quite different from the kinds that are more familiar to an American like me made me attentive to linguistic diversity around the world. In *Weapons of the Weak*, he has a chapter on vocabulary of exploitation. This gave me an idea that I could marry his ethnographic sensibility to the specific tools of ordinary language philosophy. I tried to do that in my dissertation, which became my first book.

**Your first book *Democracy in Translation: Understanding Politics in an Unfamiliar Culture* was about understanding of democracy in Senegal. What motivated you to speak about democracy with local people when there are so many organizations and projects which measure and compare the quality of democracy all over the world? Why did you choose to seek for peculiarities instead of universalities?**

Senegal is an interesting country, because it has a very long tradition of electoral politics, which date back to the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. I went there and talked to people about how they understood, in Wolof language, the term “*demokaraasi*” which was originally a loan word from French (“*démocratie*”). People talked about “*demokaraasi*” in Wolof in ways that overlapped a bit with the way that American-English speakers like me use the term “democracy.” In Wolof, “*demokaraasi*” can mean things like elections and two-party competition, but there are also other meaning that Wolof speakers attach to it. For instance, in Senegal it is very common for people to talk in proverbs when they are trying to explain something. I heard such proverbs many times when I asked what “*demokaraasi*” means. Several people told me that *demokaraasi* is like a mother of twins, which is a shorthand reference to the proverb “The mother of twins should lie on her back”, meaning that if a mother has twins, she should treat them the same, one infant shouldn't have more opportunities to nurse than the other. In the realm of politics, it

conveys the idea that if things are distributed fairly by the government, it doesn't matter how that decision is made, whether there are laws that are followed. As long as people are treated fairly, that counts as 'demokaraasi'.

There were many more not self-evident uses of "demokaraasi" that differed from how American-English speakers typically use "democracy." Looking at them helped me see a bit more clearly what Wolof speakers understand themselves to be doing when they participate in what we recognize as democracy. They have different understanding of what it means to vote, what counts as democracy, what is good politics, and what counts as bad politics. All of this would be obscured if we went to Senegal looking for democracy as enacted in free and fair elections or electoral turnover. If we used such criteria, we would have concluded that Senegalese voters are not competent democrats. Put metaphorically, many American scholars armed with their own definitions of democracy go looking for the game of chess, but what the Senegalese are playing is the game of checkers. Many American scholars say that the Senegalese are bad chess players rather than seeing that they actually are playing a game with different rules.

People who have commitments to democracy should be interested by how people in Senegal, Philippines (where I have conducted similar research), or other parts of the world think about democracy. By learning from them, we can really expand our own mental horizons. Democracy in translation can nourish our thinking about the political world.

**Stepping back a bit – in order to infer about the voting behavior from meanings ascribed to democracy, one has to presume a constitutive function of language, not merely designative. As Ch. Taylor eloquently put it: "The language is constitutive of the reality, is essential to its being the kind of reality it is. To separate the two and distinguish them as we quite rightly distinguish the heavens from our theories about them is forever to miss the point."**

Much of positivist social science is premised on divorcing language from the world. Epistemological dualism and ontological realism undergird the view that language can be used to objectively describe a world which is free-standing and "out there." For positivist scholars, it is completely unproblematic to come up with their own definition of democracy and then go out in the world and look for it without paying attention to how people in various parts of the world talk about their own political reality. But from Wittgensteinian starting points, we see that the world and the language that we use cannot be so easily divorced. Words and the world grow up together. Language co-constitutes the practices people engage in. It would be difficult for us to conceive of voting without the word 'voting'. Language provides the categories that people use to imagine and construct the world they are operating in. This is not a crude form of linguistic determinism, but we have to acknowledge that if you really want to know what people are doing in the world and how they conceive of it, studying a language can offer a really unique and crucial window.

**You continued to study democracy in translation and did a fieldwork in other unfamiliar culture – Philippines. What you learned there by using interpretive rather than survey-research tools?**

After I did this project in Senegal I became very interested in civic education campaigns to teach people how to be good democrats. Based upon the interviewing I did in Senegal, it seemed to me that some of these campaigns were misguided. They were premised on the assumption that people in Senegal not know how to play chess and that by teaching them the rules of this game, somehow politics would be improved. Civic educators ignored the fact that people can have very good reasons to play checkers and not chess. It was a desire to investigate more deeply this mismatch between the aims of civic educators and the lifeworld of those they seek to change that drew me to the Philippines, where there were a lot of dirty electoral practices, such as vote buying, that civic educators were spending a lot of time trying to clean up.

Out of my fieldwork in the Philippines came two books *The Hidden Costs of Clean Election Reform*<sup>9</sup> and *Election for Sale: The Causes and Consequences of Vote Buying*.<sup>10</sup> I also wrote a stand-alone article based on interviews I and my research assistants conducted on the meaning of ‘demokrasya.. *Demokrasya* is the rough equivalent of democracy in Tagalog – the most widely spoken language in the country. The interviews we did on *demokrasya* were from one small place in the Philippines and I wanted to understand more about how the term was used elsewhere in the country, so I turned to some Asian Barometer surveys in which researchers asked open-ended questions about the meaning of *demokrasya* in the Philippines. To me, it seemed that their work conflated ‘democracy’ and ‘demokrasya.’ My attention was also drawn to a closely related term, ‘*kalayaan*,# which roughly means freedom but does not mean exactly the same thing. In write-ups of the Asian Barometer survey results, this term was often interpreted to mean civil liberties, but that seemed wrong to me. I was able to access the original survey data and the deeper I got into it, the less reliable I thought it was.

In the article *Thin Descriptions: The Limits of Survey Research on the Meaning of Democracy*<sup>11</sup> I picked apart what I thought went wrong with these surveys that were conducted in the Philippines on the meanings of *demokrasya*. I also tried to show how these problems were not unique at all to these particular surveys in the Philippines. If you really want to understand the local meaning of terms, I argued, survey research is really not the best tool. Ethnographic interpretive tools – like ordinary language interviewing – are much better for fleshing out how people use and understand meanings of terms and avoiding some of flattening that occurs in survey research.

**Let's turn to your book *Elucidating Social Science Concepts* which is a great interinterpretivist guide to working with concepts. Three elucidative strategies are laid out in it – grounding, locating and exposing which accordingly help to situate concepts in ordinary use of language, times and tongues, structures of power. Both in Senegal and in Philippines you grounded and located the concept of democracy.**

**Are you planning to apply a third strategy as well and address the relationship of language and power?**

I do not have to do it, because there is another scholar who opened my eyes to this question. Ido Oren at the university of Florida wrote a marvelous book called *Our Enemies and US: America's Rivalries and the Making of Political Science*<sup>12</sup> which is a kind of a history of how political scientists in United States have understood, conceptualized, and operationalized the word democracy over time. He shows that the ways in which American political scientists define democracy at any particular historical moment has been shaped heavily by US foreign policy and who the US government understood the enemies of the United States to be.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many American political scientists thought of democracy in meritocratic terms. Until World War I, Germany was seen as an exemplary democracy, but when Germany became an enemy to the US, there was a lot of pressure put on American political scientists by the American government to redefine democracy so the country's new enemy would be considered undemocratic. Political scientists who held on to the older notion of meritocracy and continued to portray Germany as an exemplar of democracy were not promoted or published and suffered greatly professionally.

In the 1930s, many scholars in American academia talked about democracy in terms of substantive outcomes – equality and fairness for instance. But with the onset of the Cold War, the US government encouraged scholars to come up with a definition of democracy that would more clearly differentiate the US from the Soviet Union and make the Soviet Union be seen as undemocratic. This is the origin of electoral definitions of democracy, which are so ascendant today in American political science. So, thinking of democracy as free and fair elections is an artifact of the Cold War and influenced by the foreign-policy objectives of the American government. Learning the history of the concept helps us see how power shaped the ways we use it today.

**What you are saying makes me think of Giovanni Sartori who complained that “a large majority of political scientists qualify as pure and simple unconscious thinkers.” He was a pioneer thinker about concept formation in political science and you call his work with concepts ‘positivist reconstruction# in contrast to your own ‘interpretivist elucidation#.**

Thank you for bringing him up. In many ways I am critical of Sartori, but I am also deeply indebted to him. His work is incredibly important and I am thankful for his efforts to make political scientists more self-conscious about the language they use. The rub is that I see the particular ways in which he encouraged self-consciousness to be deficient, given my own methodological commitments which are different from his. I wanted to encourage a different kind of self-consciousness.

There are two different communities of scholars that have different methodological – epistemological and ontological – commitments. I find value in describing them as “positivist” and “interpretivist” scholars. The way of thinking about concepts that Sartori made famous derives from

positivist methodology. It is presumed on a belief that scholars can craft a value-neutral language, that they can re-“form” it, that they can alter ordinary language to create categories to be used as fact-storing containers for sorting observations about the world. This way of tinkering with language is often called concept “formation” but really, nothing is being formed anew. I find a more accurate word to describe this process to be ‘reconstruction’. It is an act of conceptual carpentry in which conceptual containers are (re)built and (re)arranged.

The metaphor I would use to describe how interpretivists work with concepts is optometry. By “elucidating” concepts, interpretivists try to understand, to see, more clearly the language used by others as a way to shed light on the practices that those people engage in. Elucidation also aims to help us see more clearly the language we, social scientists, use and the ways in which our own social scientific language relates to the language of the people that we want to understand. Of particular importance is the way that both languages reproduce and enact power relationships. ‘Elucidation’ is a term that captures a desire to “command a clear view of the use of our words” as Wittgenstein says.

**I imagine that for some scholars this practice of elucidation appears helpful in studying social reality, but for others it is useful as long as it matters to causal explanations, hypothesis etc.**

My book appears in the Routledge Series on Interpretive Methods (edited by Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea), so the primary audience for the book are the people who work or are thinking about working with interpretivist methods. Yet some of the insights and tools presented in the book could be used to great effect by scholars who are working within the positivist tradition. I think the book could help them reconstruct concepts better: to avoid major pitfalls, to be more aware of power relationships, to develop definitions that don’t ignore aspects of people’s reality that you are trying to measure or describe.

**As you mentioned two epistemic communities in social science – is it possible to really understand one another, to translate what each is doing and at the same time acknowledge the differences? For instance, John Gerring emphasizes a unified framework to social science methodology.**

I like the word ‘translation’ that you used, because these are really different languages and you need to learn them, so that you can become bilingual – or maybe even trilingual if we take seriously the work of Gary Goertz & James Mahoney. In *A Tale of Two Cultures*<sup>13</sup> they talk about the significant cultural differences between quantitative and qualitative scholars within the positivist tradition. I think that there are really different languages that quantitative positivists, qualitative positivists, and interpretivists use.

In pointing out these differences, I also think it’s important to note that we are not talking about monolithic, opposing camps. Some scholars move between these different traditions. There are also some commitments that are shared across these epistemic communities – we all in our own different ways aspire to make our research trustworthy, for

instance. For positivists, quantitative positivists especially, trustworthy research must be replicable. For interpretivists, reflexivity is really important to establish trustworthiness. Different ways to make research trustworthy derive from different epistemological and ontological commitments. But we all want our research to be trustworthy.

**I suppose in order to acknowledge different standards there is a need for an epistemic humility.**

Yes, the political theorist Anne Norton wrote something I find wonderfully insightful: “The hope for a tool that will not turn in the hand, for a language that will speak without deception, for a method that cannot be used irresponsibly, is illusory.”<sup>14</sup> No matter what method one chooses there are going to be problems with it. Nobody’s approach is free of danger or above reproach so no matter what choices we make we all should be humble about them.

**We talked a lot why it is important to study how other people understand politics and what tools do we have to do that, now, at the end of the interview, I would like to ask how you conceive politics?**

What a good question. In fact, I teach a course called “What is politics?” Politics is an incredibly complicated word. If we go back to the ancient Greeks and the original meaning, the term had a lot to do with managing our common world, managing the ‘polis’ and I think that this original sense of politics has stayed with us over time. Sometimes when we use the term ‘politics’, we refer to this common good, what Hannah Arendt calls “the political.” But the word has also taken on other meanings over time, meanings that have a lot to do with power and competition, at least in American English. Those meanings are certainly alive with us as well. Politics now can be a dirty word. There are still other ways in which American English-speakers use the word, with both positive and negative connotations.

It is important to recognize that politics are all of these things and that we are free also to inflect politics with new meanings. In the future, politics can mean something different than today. Also, we need to recognize that there is no universal understanding of politics. Politics is a parochial term, it is an English-language term. In Arabic it is ‘siasa’, in Wolof it is ‘politig’. All of these terms refer and enact different understandings of the world and it’s very interesting to attend to them. If we went around looking for American English understandings of democracy as survey researchers sometimes do, or if we went around looking for politics as Harold Lasswell defines it (“who gets what, when, and how”), we would have a very impoverished understanding of the different ways in which people live their lives.

In my own research, I try to be sensitive to different meanings, to recognize the complex grammar of this term. I try not to feed my thinking with only one understanding of politics. Wittgenstein spoke about the dangers of an unbalanced diet, when “one nourishes one’s thinking with only one kind of example.”

**One last question. You also teach a course “The Language of Politics” which starts with fiction of Borges, Márquez, Lewis etc. In**

## what way texts outside the walls of academia are of value to political scientist?

Let me extend this Wittgensteinian eating metaphor. We nourish our thinking with the things that we read. If you read only political science, your diet is one-sided, impoverished, you can become anemic, because you are not getting all the nutrients you need. There is great value to reading outside of political science, outside of the social sciences, and outside of academia. There are lots of deep and interesting insights into language, power, and politics that we can find in literature.

## Notes

- 1 I am grateful to members of VU IIRPS SMD (Students' Scientific Society) Austėja Šataitė and Marius Milieška for the help with the transcript of the interview.
- 2 Pitkin H. F., *Wittgenstein and Justice: On the Significance of Ludwig Wittgenstein for Social and Political Thought*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972.
- 3 Pitkin H. F., *The Concept of Representation*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967.
- 4 Taylor Ch., "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man", *The Review of Metaphysics* 25 (1), 1971, p. 3–51.
- 5 Austin J. L., *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962.
- 6 Lakoff G. and Johnson M., *Metaphors we live by*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981.
- 7 Scott J., *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976.
- 8 Scott J., *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1985.
- 9 Schaffer F. C., *The Hidden Costs of Clean Election Reform*, New York: Cornell University Press, 2008.
- 10 *Election for Sale: The Causes and Consequences of Vote Buying* (ed. Schaffer F. C.), Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2007.
- 11 Schaffer F. C., "Thin Descriptions: The Limits of Survey Research on the Meaning of Democracy", *Polity* 46 (3), 2014, p. 303–330.
- 12 Oren I., *Our Enemies and US: America's Rivalries and the Making of Political Science*, New York: Cornell University Press, 2003.
- 13 Goertz G., Mahoney J., *A Tale of Two Cultures: Qualitative and Quantitative Research in the Social Sciences*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012.
- 14 Norton Ane, *95 Theses on Politics, Culture, and Method*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004, p. 135.