

# On being a foreign body in the field, or how reflexivity around translation can take us beyond language

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**Abstract:** Translation in cross-cultural research is being increasingly acknowledged as a serious methodological issue in geography. Translation dilemmas present researchers with incommensurabilities of meaning, thus providing insights into culturally specific ways of being as expressed in language. However, reflexivity around translation in the field can also highlight those moments of cultural practice where language falls short of experience. Engaging with Wittgenstein's late work on language, and with authors in the more-than-representational school of thought, I explore a personal experience of dealing with 'broken words' (Harrison 2007) in ethnographic fieldwork. Translation dilemmas, I demonstrate, may highlight not only culturally specific areas of meaning, but may also point to those areas where the local language fails to account for the fullness of culturally significant ways of being. Translation in cross-cultural research, I argue, is less about the decoding of texts, and more about coming to understand a form of life. This understanding must include practical as well as linguistic aspects. Researchers-as-translators need thus to remain sensitive to the shortcomings of local modes of communication; this sensitivity is aided by reflexivity encouraged by translating in the field.

**Key words:** translation, auto-ethnography, Wittgenstein, reflexivity, cross-language research

## **Translation and it's 'issues'**

Issues of interpretation and translation in qualitative research have been an ongoing concern for researchers in the social sciences. It is in the context of 'overseas' fieldwork that language 'issues' become most apparent, and yet remain rarely addressed (Poblete 2009). The challenges of translation can cause anxiety over the loss of meaning, leading to a silencing of translation in the pursuit of a 'clean and tidy' account (Temple 2005). However, bringing translation to the fore and examining it as part of the research process can enhance reflexivity around the claims to truth being made, challenging the idea of an ethnographer as an 'omnipresent knower' (Tremlett 2009). Particularly in the context of post-colonial studies, authors have been drawing on the work of Derrida (1991), Spivak (1992) and other poststructuralist writers to address researcher's positionality in the context of language (Temple and Young 2004), be that in their identity as insider-outsider researcher translator (Kim 2012), or in terms of their relationship with local translators/field assistants (Twyman et al. 1999, Temple 2002, Turner 2010). Translation has thus been seen as involving ethical and political choices, and researchers have been exploring how to practice translation in ways which are both sensitive to and empowering of the researched 'others' (Subedi and Rhee 2008, Lincoln and González y González 2008).

Translation has also been noted to offer opportunities for reflexivity around the role language itself plays within the study context. Translation is generally understood as a transfer of meaning from one time-space context to another (Crane et al. 2009, 40); however, in this act of transfer 'translations constantly suffer from not being able to convey the richness of connotations' (Müller 2007, 207). It has been suggested that the unavoidable betrayal (or creativity) that translation implies can deepen understanding rather than pose a threat to the integrity of research (Temple 1997). Do Mar Pereira et al. note that 'a lot of insight can be found, and a lot of knowledge can be produced, through explicit and critical reflection on the challenges and incommensurabilities of language difference' (2009, 5). Similarly Smith argued we should move away from understanding translation in research as uncovering a 'truth' about the 'Other' in the home language, and towards seeing translation as a hybrid in-between space between 'the two languages, two cultures, researcher and researched' (1996, 163).

## **Translation and the more-than-representational**

The question of translatability has thus thoroughly become part of the debates around epistemology in the social sciences. In this paper, I engage with these debates by suggesting that translation offers a further opportunity for reflexivity around the subject of inquiry itself. Paying attention to the 'issues' of translation in the field, I argue, can alert us to those dimensions of our research in which meaning is made through more than language, or outside of language. The importance of the more-than-representational, embodied, and tacit ways of being to the performance of everyday life and generation of meaning has been increasingly acknowledged in geography (e.g. Thrift 1996, Lorimer 2005). In this paper I argue that in the context of translation, new areas of significance become accessible not only when two linguistic maps of meaning (Twyman et al. 1999) fail to overlap, but also when the fissure between language and experience becomes apparent, when 'words are found to be wanting, when they fail to deliver or deliver nothing or, at least, nothing communicable or representable' (Harrison 2007, 593).

In what follows, I offer a personal account of struggles with translation in the context of overseas fieldwork, and I narrate the learning I derived from them. In my experience, the more-than-representational aspect of cross-cultural, cross-lingual research can be easily overlooked in the romance of finding a linguistic common ground for communicating with 'the Other'. For a foreign learner, a new language tantalises with the possibility of complete and transparent representation, if only the right words can be found. This affective dimension of conducting research in a foreign language has to be recognised, particularly in the context of participatory or ethnographic work. Being a foreign, mute, clumsy body in the field can be embarrassing and frustrating (Watson 2004), and can affect what knowledge claims the researcher is comfortable making (Tremlett 2009). Hoffman's (1989) hunger for self-expression in a foreign tongue as a young migrant is evocative of this experience:

'I've become obsessed with words. (...) If I take in enough, then maybe I can incorporate the language, make it part of my psyche and my body. (...) The thought that there are parts of the language I'm missing can induce a small panic in me, as if such gaps were missing parts

of the world in my mind – as if the totality of world and the mind were coeval with the totality of language’ (216)

The worries Tremlett, Watson and others express may seem naïve in the light of the widely accepted tenants of post-structuralist theories which challenge the conception of language as a transparent medium. However, as Traps notes the ‘recognition of theory does not always translate to the implementation of practice’ (2009, 142). I thus hope that narrating how attending to the challenges of translation helped my reflexivity around research practice may aid others undertaking cross-cultural research.

### **Going beyond language with (late) Wittgenstein**

To better conceptualise my struggles, I draw on Wittgenstein's insights in his *Philosophical investigations*. The role language plays in the way people make sense of the world and communicate with others were of central interest to Wittgenstein's work in the later part of his life. He proposed that it had become common sense for us to assume that signs (such as words) and meanings stand somehow separately and independently of one another (Harrison 2002). This belief in the power of signs is not a ‘stupid prejudice’ (Wittgenstein 2009, no. 340); however, it does lead us on a wild goose chase in search of universal truths and underlying principles – for a ‘*super-order between – so to speak – super-concepts.*’ (Wittgenstein 2009, no. 97). Instead of assuming that meanings of signs (such as words, numbers, or symbols) are somehow independent entities whose use is constrained by fixed rules, he proposed we look at meanings as emergent from the context of their use, from the role they play in what he called ‘language games’. In this perspective the transference of meaning in language, that is a situation of understanding between one person and another, is not to be seen as a shared agreement about something primary and ideal, a Platonic essence (Harrison 2002, 489). Rather, Wittgenstein's propositional view of language sees meaning as emergent *from use*, and arrived at through experience of use, not through the following of rules, which are always partial and changeable. Instead of looking for an idealised expression of sense, we are directed towards the functions that signs have within the practice of using a language (McGuinn 1997: 56). Understanding is no longer a purely

mental process (Wittgenstein 2009, no. 154), but a relational achievement. In this perspective the mastery a native speaker has of a language derives from their wide experience of use, not because they have access to an underlying essence; words are ultimately connected to the world by training, not by translation (Bloor 1983: 28).<sup>1</sup>

While grounding our understanding of language in the lived experience of its use, Wittgenstein also indicates the impossibility of depending for understanding on signs alone. His descriptions of language- games show that lived experience always comes before the sign; that the use of sign emerges not as a perfect descriptor, but as more of a punctuator, an indicator of a situation as sharing similarities with other situations. Signs become linked to characteristic experiences – for example, the phrase ‘to point’ becomes linked with experiences of being told ‘to point at a shape’ or ‘to point at a number’ (Wittgenstein 2009, no 35). Through usage we become accustomed to making connections between different instances of pointing, but there are always new instances in which we have to decide whether ‘pointing’ is the right sign to use, or whether a different description is more appropriate. Lived experience always challenges our attempts at tying it to language. Life overflows its explanation, and demands engagement, as ‘once I have exhausted the justifications, I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: “This is simply what I do”.’ (Wittgenstein 2009, no. 217).

In what follows I explore how reflexivity around translation in cross-cultural fieldwork can help identify the significant spaces of meaning beyond language, and as a result extend the scope of research beyond linguistic equivalence and into the local relationship between experience and expression. While my point applies to inter-language and intra-language research equally, I suggest that cross-cultural research offers a particularly fertile ground for

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This immediately directs our attention to the potential multiplicity of fluencies within one language, as even within the same language words/signs may play different roles within language games, or different language games may utilise specific words and signs.

noting the roles language plays as more than representation. When undertaking research within one's own language, the researcher may be challenged to master how discourse and practice work together within a particular occupational, age, or place-specific group (as in the communities of practice approach, e.g. Barton and Tusting 2005). In the case of cross-cultural research, these local and individual ways of marrying language and practice are further enriched by the emotive and embodied relationship to the language as something acquired through the process of socialisation (Pavlenko 2006), which can be similarly local and individual, specific to a community, a family, a place. As Temple and Koterba note, 'changing languages involves translating lives rather than simply words' (2009), and cross-cultural researchers are well positioned to observe the particular ways language and practice interact by being reflexive in their translation. Translating while in the field of research, I show, can force one to pay attention to the instances of meaning breakdown which may have been otherwise overlooked, and lead to a change in the analytical gaze (Foucault 1973) away from what is said, and towards the embodied, tacit, lived modes of being and meaning making, or what Harrison (2000) calls 'the sensate' which is 'the relation to an outside and constitutes the surface on which we dwell in everyday life' (499).

### **Vine pruning vernacular**

In my doctoral research I was interested in the relationship between the meanings employed in the discourses of the organic wine industry, such as 'nature' and 'authenticity', and the everyday practices of growing grapes and making wine. I explored these through participatory ethnographic methods, working as a vineyard and winery worker at four organic wineries in Northern Italy. The material I draw on in this paper comes predominantly from my experience of vine apprenticeship at a cooperative winery in the Piemonte region, where intensely hands-on vineyard practices enabled me to undergo a period of training as a viticulturist (see also Krzywoszynska 2015).<sup>2</sup> Throughout my research, I made heavy use of audio and video recording, which was partially informed by my less-than-fluent (Tremlett

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The names of the respondents have been changed.

2009) language competency. Although I had a good grasp of Italian language, technical vitivinicultural terms as well as dialect words and local accents challenged my understanding. As a result I recorded not only the more formal interviews, but also most of the everyday ethnographic conversations, which I then translated and transcribed in the evenings. Temple and Young (2004) have raised worries over potential dominance of English-centric meaning when using direct translation. However, I found it was the conscious act of doing translation in the field which forced me to examine the assumptions I held about the relationship between world and language in my research, and which resulted in some of the most interesting insights about vitivinicultural practice. In-field translation denaturalised English (Smith 1996), and forced me to reflect on the process, and indeed the possibility, of verbal meaning transfer in viticultural practice. As I struggled to make sense of vine work, my trust in the explanatory power of language started to waver.

A key practice in the vineyards was pruning, which wrote the meanings of grape cultivation into the bodies of the vines, making very real distinctions between useful and excess growth. Figuring out how the distinctions were made and how the meanings were taught became my obsession. When I became an apprentice and a temporary worker at the vineyards, my 'making sense' of vine pruning acquired a practical and embodied element. I had a chance to observe how vine pruning knowledge was transferred, and to participate in the process of knowledge acquisition on equal ground with other junior workers. Below is an excerpt from my field diary (5th February 2009) in which I describe and transcribe a section of a video recording I took earlier that day. It illustrates my first attempt at learning to prune, and gives the first indication of the limits of verbal explanation I was to face in my attempts at learning vine work (please see video 1).

"Finally a day without snow. We meet at eight o'clock to go the vineyard to prune. (...) there is Virgilio, who came especially to give some additional instructions to the vineyard workers who have been pruning the vines for a few weeks now. We stand around in a loose group (...) Virgilio is speaking, holding a cut piece of a pruned vine in his hand.

“Questo qua, nonostante, son tanti motivi, uno che nonostante fosse stato corto questo non è, così così, l'anno scorso chi ha potato ha fatto bene a lasciarlo perché ha tentato ancora di, no? Se no, sarebbe stato nel primo anno.”

Standing in the snowy vineyard that day, trying to make sense of Virgilio's descriptions, I found myself brought to tears by my incompetence. I could make out the sounds, I could make out the individual words even, but I could not make out the meaning, I could not 'make sense' of what he was saying. I was convinced that the meaning I was missing had to do with the relationship between description and practice, that what I was missing was the one-to-the-other relationship between words and things, words and actions. My later translation of the pruning instructions did not aid my understanding:

“This here, there are many things you have to think about. One is that, even though it was short, it was more or less all right, whoever pruned it last year did the right thing leaving it, because it tried to, still, right? If not it would have been in the first year.”

The words were all there, but the meaning was absent. I understood what Virgilio had said, but I did not understand what he was *saying*. Was this a failure of translation? I considered myself relatively fluent in Italian, and yet in the vineyards I was rendered dumb. In order to communicate, one must say something which makes sense to the other; a child's babbling is not speech, although the sounds uttered may be the same as those used to construct 'actual' words. Language is a public affair, and meaning in language is constructed by reference to a set of experiences and understandings which form a particular culture shared by a group of people. As a result, meaning is always contextual, local, and in flux, it is 'a process, a consequence of exchange, correction, and reciprocity' (Steiner 1975, 172). This also means that what is meaning-ful, what signifies, has to be rediscovered anew in each cultural-linguistic setting. As Simon states:

“The solutions to many of the translator's dilemmas are not to be found in dictionaries, but rather in an understanding of the way language is tied to local realities (...). Translators must constantly make decisions about the cultural meanings which language carries, and evaluate the degree to which the two different worlds they inhabit are 'the same'. These are not



technical difficulties, they are not the domain of specialists in obscure or quaint vocabularies. (...) In fact the process of meaning transfer has less to do with finding the cultural inscription of a term than in reconstructing its value. (1996, 137–8).

The value Simon refers to is linked to what the researcher-translator believes is meant at a particular moment. Interpreted in the context of cross-lingual communication in ethnographic research, the citation indicates that the key moment of translation happens not once the spoken word has been written down, but in the lived and embodied environment of research itself. The first act of translation in research is not between the researcher and the readers of their text, nor between the research participants and those readers, but between the participants and the researcher. It is in this space that communication happens, and that sense is made. It is in this space that the value element of meaning is established. The first stage of translation, then, is *understanding*. Faced with the enigmatic body of the vine, and the inexplicable speech of Virgilio, I did not understand.

Over many months I continued to accompany my research participants in the vineyards. I continued to observe, ask and listen. In explaining their actions to me, the workers used words such as *sperone*, *stomber*, and *capofrutto* to describe different parts of the plant. The terms confused me, but also gave me hope. They seemed to be hinting that the distinctions between useful and excess growth I was interested in were named, existed conceptually. My ignorance, I continued to feel, was an inability to see the link between the word and the world. My view of the relationship between words and objects, one that Wittgenstein thoroughly critiques, and which I was to revise myself, was that if 'the words (...) name objects (...) [e]very word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands' (Wittgenstein 2009, no. 1).

In line with this, my thinking about pruning became dominated with the idea of a 'code', a repository of meaning separate from practice. I imagined that in pruning workers were 'reading' the vine, like one may read an instruction manual. I envisaged them translating from the visible body of the vine to a conceptual system of meaning inscribed in language, and back again into action. In my understanding I relied on what Ingold (2000) calls the building perspective, imagining that the vines were somehow known before they were

worked on. The idea of a code, or a set of rules, was reinforced by diagrams such as fig. 1, which hinted at the invisible grammar of vine pruning. I could translate the parts of the vine indicated as 'fruiting cane' and 'spur' into the words used by the vineyard workers with the help of English vine pruning related websites. But I struggled to translate the clean two-dimensional schematics into the untidy tangles of actual vines (fig. 2). I knew the spur was to be found somewhere in that tangle, but no matter how often the difference between the trunk of the vine and the *sperone* was explained to me, no matter how many times it was shown to me even, I did not see it. Over and over again in my evening translations, I was faced with the emptiness of words. I translated, but the words were not telling me anything. The meaning leaked out.

I believed that if I could categorically denote where the trunk ended and the spur began, 'if only I could fix my gaze *absolutely sharply* on this fact and get it into focus, I could not but grasp the essence of matter' (Wittgenstein 2009, no. 113). Through constant repetition and re-use, language abstracts from difference (Wittgenstein 2009, no. 446). Because the same terms were being employed to describe radically different plants, I assumed that this possibility of comparison hinted at a general state of affairs (Wittgenstein 2009, no. 104). This in turn mislead me 'into thinking that if anyone utters a sentence and means or understands it, he is thereby operating a calculus according to definite rules' (2009, no. 81). I believed that the activity I observed in the vineyards was governed by rules which 'when uncovered or unmasked, would serve to explain the constitution of the meaningful activity as meaningful' (Harrison 2002, p. 491). I felt my participants were withholding from me the kernel of truth. When they would tell me 'I learned all from practice, and it's a good way to learn, but I can't always explain why I do what I do' (Peter, 30/01/2009), I refused to believe them. I was determined to uncover the explainable reality of their actions; I was digging for 'the gold of things' (Foucault 1970, 38).

What was lacking for my translation to 'make sense' (Harrison 2000) of the broken and partial narratives of vine pruning was the understanding of action. In vine pruning, like in other farming practices, the acquisition of skill – that is the understanding of the 'meaning', the ability to go on – was not dependent on the assimilation of abstract rules, expressed in language. The skill resided in the capacity to make situated and knowledgeable decisions

about interventions into the plants, informed by previous experiences of working with vines in this particular place, and of growing wine grapes for this particular company (see also Krzywoszynska 2015). Later, I found that in the acquisition of vine pruning skill, words such as *capofrutto* and *sperone* served less as descriptors, and more as aids with which to sensitise the attention of the apprentice as they learn to see and function in the world in a new way (Ingold 2000, Gieser 2008). To arrive at this conclusion I had to realise that I could not translate because I did not do. As every evening in my translations words continued to fail me, I was forced to move beyond them. While I could find word equivalents, mechanistic translation 'on paper' did not aid my understanding. Wittgenstein stressed that words are not prior to actions, and are not tied in a one-to-one relationship to them. Rather, words are bundles, indicators of various instances in which they had been used in the past and which share a sort of 'family resemblance' (Wittgenstein 2009, no. 67). The doing is prior to the act of description. I struggled with the emptiness of language because I was counting on the words to do the explaining, to uncover the rules guiding the pruner's hands.

Going back to the video from the 5th February 2009, let us examine the gestures. As he is speaking, Virgilio is running his thumb up and down the pruned part of the vine, across the knots and scars of previous growths and cuts. His gestures hint at a world of knowledge beyond language. The touching is more important than the talking. The words are what Harrison refers to as 'broken words', attempts at speech in which 'in the telling we recognise that there is nothing there for us to recognise and when what is communicated is *the failure of communication*' (2007, 591).

Instead of asking and listening, I started to play a game in the vineyards. Like other novice workers, I was not allowed to prune myself, in case I maimed or killed the plant. So I would squat in front of a vine, a few paces ahead of the working pruner, and try to imagine, in my mind's eye, with my mind's hands, the places where I would cut. The vines were being trained in Guyot style, in which all branches are cut away, with only one fruiting cane and one spur left for the next growing season. Initially, I believed that to make the decisions necessary for cutting, one had to recognise the parts called 'fruiting cane' and 'spur' in the plant, and then simply carve them out of the vine. The more I played my guessing game, the

more I was led to think, however, that the categories 'fruiting cane' and 'spur' did not pre-exist the act of cutting.

Which of the branches would become fruiting cane and which spur was not determined, it was subjectively chosen by the worker in the light of their knowledge about the plant, the vineyard, the soil, the climate, the kind of wine the company aimed at producing. The value of the words did not derive from a one-to-one correspondence between the word 'in here' and the reality 'out there'. Instead, the value was the future-oriented aspiration of the worker, the desired development of the plant. The meaning of the word was not pre-existent; the words were not imposed on the world from the outside; they emerged from it. As I muse at the vine, a pruning worker comes into view, makes the cuts, and moves on. Relief knocks me off my balance – these are the cuts I would have made! Now, I feel, I can go on (Wittgenstein 2009, no. 154). Beyond words, I have finally understood.

### **Conclusions: Finding meaning beyond language**

Paying attention to the failures of language in cross-cultural translation can lead to a change in the analytical gaze. Faced with the emptiness of words spoken in the vineyards, in my research I moved from asking and listening, to looking and doing. Throughout, the words were there, but words were not where the meaning was. Instead, I discovered the meaning of vitivincultural work was in its doing, in the close, tactile, and largely tacit relationship between the workers and the plants (see also Krzywoszynska 2015). *Capofrutto* and *sperone*, I found, were not significant because they were *named*, they were significant because they were *done*. Trying to locate the meaning of words before I had felt and understood through sight, touch, and action what they signify in the life of the plant and the winery was absurd, like trying to understand the working of an engine by counting all the screws. To get to the meaning, my habitual way of being as an 'eye in the sky' ethnographic observer had to be disturbed; not just my language, but my whole way of being was made *unheimlich*, strange, unhomely (Smith 1996). The way into knowing the vine work, I found, was not through talking about it, but through doing it. This is not to say that during my research I became a proficient vine pruner; however, I could see the way ahead of me, I could feel my feet were on the right path. Finally, I could let go of language as a sole source of meaning.



It was through reflecting on the failures of translation that I was able to examine the limits to language more generally in vitivincultural practices. Translation is a process of exploration of meaning, and as such must be attentive to the moments where meaning overflows what is said, where the words fall short. The moments where our respondents stutter, babble, or fall silent, the moments where we find we are unable to follow, may hint at important areas of signification beyond language. Following our participants into these spaces is not always easy, especially when faced with the ‘unavoidable obligations of relating the nonrelational’ (Harrison 2007, 593) once returned from the field. It may carry a price, too, as changing methodologies will have obvious consequences on what can be ‘brought back’ from the field, as well as the form and the perceived authoritativeness of the truth-claims made. I believe however that in deep qualitative research this is a step worth taking, as participatory methods can provide a much richer perspective on the worlds of experience our respondents inhabit. There is a growing body of work on which to draw, including auto-ethnography (Lorimer 2006), and psychoanalytical (Proudfoot 2010) and visual methods (Laurier and Brown 2008; Laurier and Philo 2003), all of which have been used to attempt to explore and communicate the more-than-linguistic spheres of meaning. Crosscultural researchers, I suggest, are in a good position to further contribute to the exploration of qualitative methods beyond representation, as the fissures translation creates can open to them areas of signification otherwise hidden from view. Just as the imperfect relationship between different languages in translation can open a fertile hybrid space (Smith 1996), so can the exploration of the limits to what is sayable in a local context. **Acknowledgments**

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## Figures

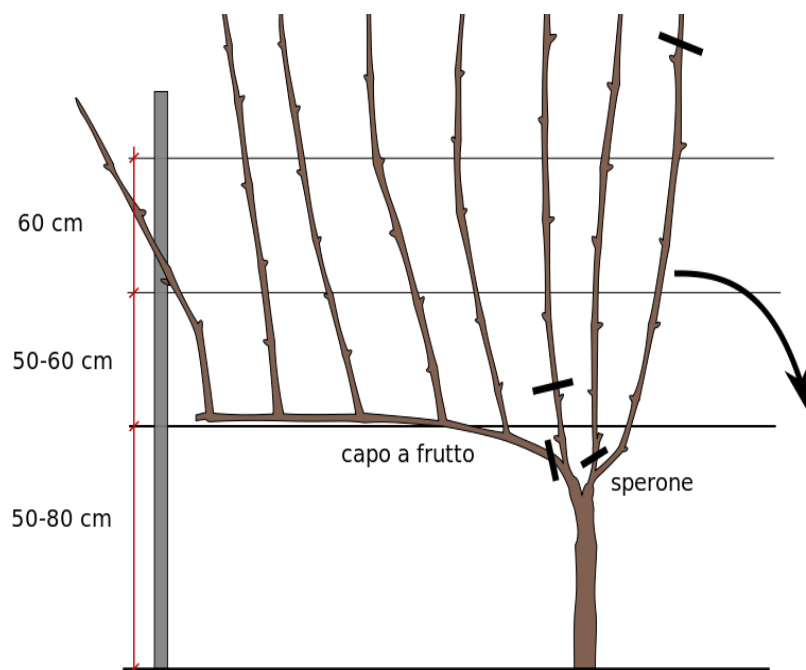


Fig.1 Schematic of a Guyot trained vine with pruning cuts indicated (Giancarlo Dessi, 2008, [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Guyot\\_1.svg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Guyot_1.svg)).



Fig. 2 Vine before pruning.