Forms of thought have generally been interpreted as an expression of a specific language or "culture." In this paper, I examine three classic objections: (1) societies sharing the same "system of thought" may speak different languages, and vice versa; (2) if a relation between language and thought exists, it is an indirect and controversial one, and we should never take it for granted; (3) the languages that we use to qualify different kinds of thought are constantly translated. Through a discussion of the context of translation, I argue that instead of seeing the possibility of translation as a theoretical difficulty for defining thought, we could, on the contrary, consider the ethnography of translation as a chance to observe the dynamics and structure of thought processes, and to study how they operate in different cultural contexts. Using three Amazonian examples, I will try to describe the kind of cognition involved by the form of translation that Jakobson calls transmutation. I will argue that from this ethnographic analysis, we can not only derive a better (both wider and more precise) idea of some, rarely studied, cultural translation processes, but also draw from it a new way to define the concept of "cultural ontology," both for Amazonian cultures and in more general terms.

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