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TRANSLATION AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR MULTILINGUAL DEMOCRACY

Abstract:
Translation Studies, in its foundational terms, must assume multilingualism but has also long presupposed monoglots: whenever our models separate "source language" from "target language," we present translations as border-markers between monolingual spaces. One way forward is to find translation in all communication, within all linguistic spaces, to an extent that would dissolve any pretense at monolingualism. An alternative solution, more tied to empirical historiography, is to trace the ways in which multilingual ideological formations use translation in order to divide linguistic spaces at the same time as they expand across those same spaces. Using numerous local examples, Pym's article examines the use of translators and interpreters to bring about multilingual democracies and considers the ways in which current technologies and practices of translation are reshaping answers to the question.

My concern is with the use of translators and interpreters in order to bring about multilingual democracies, particularly in relation to language learning. To reduce things to a question: for a democracy, should we be translating, learning languages, speaking just one common language, or something else? But first, why should we be interested in multilingual polities in the first place?

A House Bill for Individuals

The Arizona State Legislature has been more concerned with these questions than many would like. Questions of racial profiling have arisen and apparently been resolved in the US Supreme Court. More engaging for our current concern, however, is the legislation banning the teaching of courses for particular ethnic groups. House Bill 2281 of 2010 has been the object of considerable debate, some legal wrangling, and more than a little humor. Yet rarely does one see the almost poetic density of its basic argument:

> THE LEGISLATURE FINDS AND DECLARES THAT PUBLIC SCHOOL PUPILS SHOULD BE TAUGHT TO TREAT AND VALUE EACH OTHER AS INDIVIDUALS AND NOT BE TAUGHT TO RESENT OR HATE OTHER RACES OR CLASSES OF PEOPLE.
>
> 8 15-112. Prohibited courses and classes; enforcement
>
> A. A SCHOOL DISTRICT OR CHARTER SCHOOL IN THIS STATE SHALL NOT INCLUDE IN ITS PROGRAM OF INSTRUCTION ANY COURSES OR CLASSES THAT INCLUDE ANY OF THE FOLLOWING:
>
> 1. PROMOTE THE OVERTHROW OF THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT.
>
> 2. PROMOTE RESENTMENT TOWARD A RACE OR CLASS OF PEOPLE.
>
> 3. ARE DESIGNED PRIMARILY FOR PUPILS OF A PARTICULAR ETHNIC GROUP.
>
> 4. ADVOCATE ETHNIC SOLIDARITY INSTEAD OF THE TREATMENT OF PUPILS AS INDIVIDUALS.

The text merits some respect. No one would expect an education system to seek to overthrow the government whose legal support it requires. Similarly, few would seriously set out to "promote resentment toward a race or class of people," at least within the bounds of a common reason that I charitably assume. Of course, one could baulk a little at the passage that makes "resentment" a necessary consequence of "a particular ethic group," although a thin line of rational thought remains traceable. But when we come to the final opposition,

where "ethnic solidarity" becomes the opposite of "individuals," some logical fireworks should go off. Reading the implicatures in reverse, the chain of claims is that ethnic solidarity leads to resentment, which will in turn lead to the overthrow of the United States Government. Those are huge conceptual jumps, and not ones that all of us are prepared to make. For many, the term "solidarity" still carries very positive connotations; it is not easily portrayed as an evil to be rooted out. To a European, especially, this ideology seems wondrous strange.

Note that language is curiously absent here—no one seems particularly concerned about what language the courses might be taught in. The prime ideologue behind the House Bill, Tom Horne, does take some pride elsewhere in pointing out that he "has been learning Spanish seriously for three years" (2011), as if that were some kind of anti-racist merit badge. But there is little else. The ban, as phrased, concerns ethnicity, race, and class, but not language.

Now, would these squabbles be at all different if language alone were the bone of contention? I believe so, and not just because the basics of language are common to all sides in a struggle (as Stalin realized): if the ethnic courses were presented as language courses designed to create bilinguals (wherein you can fit all the cultural heritage you like), they could be adding export-oriented skills, training the nation to keep tabs on its rivals, reinforcing national security, and numerous similar marketing ploys, not all of which are entirely unfounded. A language course seems much easier to sell than anything that proudly associates itself with ethnic pride, and the reason rests on fundamental ambiguities that are not trivial. Yet there is also a more substantial reason why language should do better than race or ethnicity here. To grasp it we need to unpack the underlying ideology of the legislation.

The one truly positive value in the House Bill is this "individual" that appears twice in the text and clearly wins all the bets. The individual is opposed to a polity comprising ethnic groups or classes; it is an individual that has a noble history in American political thought, recognized as having inalienable rights in the Declaration of Independence, for instance. That individual deserves at least the same respect we accord the House Bill. One might ask, though, since we are looking for language in places where none is mentioned, how and why that individual speaks? To whom? About what? In what language?

The linguistic poverty of the individual is not hard to demonstrate. Pratt (2012) reminded us that Saussurean communication requires at least two such individuals, published (actually in two different versions in Saussure 1916/1989, 36-37) as mirror images of each other:
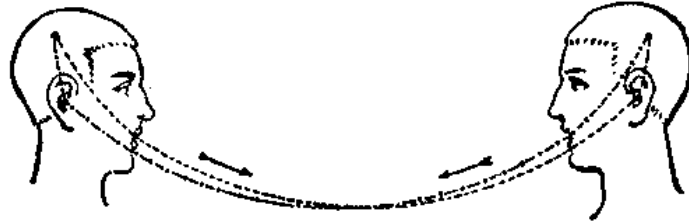
Those impeccable individuals are without gender, age, or social class—they could seek only solidarity with each other's individuality. We sidestep the question of race (although the features reproducing individuality do seem conveniently Caucasian). Now, what else has been left out? Quite a bit.

For Derrida's initial grammatology (1967), for the study of the *gramme*, writing had been left out. Why should language only involve speech? Where was the written signifier, the one that left meaning unbound by immediate situation, the one that opened differences within the medium itself? The inclusion of writing might give a plurality of channels, a disruptive shadowing, not unlike the workings of translation.

Also missing, however, is the possibility, indeed the social probability, that more than one language is in play, that the command of the idealized common *langue* is thus not equal, and indeed is very probably highly unequal (especially if we are talking about pedagogy, where one side is assumed to know more than the other). In some cases, the model might even require a third sexless, ageless head to mediate—that is, the Saussurean model does not envisage multilingualism, the associated power relations, or any need for a translator or interpreter.

The necessarily social nature of multilingual communication is thus omitted, not just because the two individuals are assumed to be the same (as might be the case in an idealized abstract society) but also because the channel itself does not include the perturbations, the histories that ensue from cooperation across differences. We are left with angels in paradise (who else could have God-given rights?), practically devoid of language not only because they are so similar that telepathy would suffice, but more profoundly because their collective existence is

so equal that nothing really happens, so there is little to communicate about. This individual is without language in any strong sense—people only have language when they speak to someone about something, that is, in society.

That is the important point. You can complicate the picture by giving the individual many different qualities—skin color, inherited wealth, physiological make-up, intellectual abilities and temperaments, and so on, such that there are real differences prior to the individual's socialization, and power may then do its work. However, it is not quite so easy to do that if we are talking about language alone. Why? First, because language is only developed socially, in the process of socialization, collectively. Second, because it is necessarily shared, and necessarily used within networks of solidarity (hence the mutual recognition of meaningful forms). And third, because individuals in a multilingual society can acquire, develop and manipulate more than one language, mixing and changing them, without having to restrict themselves to one group or the other. If the House Bill had been about languages, rather than ethnicities or races, its wondrously reductive argumentative jumps could surely have never been made. Hence my particular interest in language.

Cultural Rights in Habermas

Those arguments are relatively easy. It is not hard to undo the opposition between the individual and the social group. However, to take up the issue with a little more seriousness, sooner or later one has to deal with people who have thought with some care about what a multilingual and multicultural society might be. For Jürgen Habermas, in several of his key texts from the mid-1990s (notably *Between Facts and Norms*, 1996), the liberal state can be based neither on a collection of individuals, nor on a sum of disparately different communities that just happen to live side-by-side. Habermas recognizes these individualist and "communitarian" views, then attempts to steer a course between them. His trajectory might hold clues for a House Bill on multilingualism.

In his critique of the individualist position, Habermas refuses to accept, very correctly in my opinion, any positioning of human rights prior to the sovereignty of citizens. Rights are conceded collectively, and may thus become the object of debate and decision. In a democratic liberal society, rights can then come with obligations attached, hence with a certain necessary solidarity. The House Bill

opposition between "individual" and "solidarity" would thus seem to be dissolved.

Turning to the communitarian position, Habermas's critique focuses on the right and the obligation to participate in governance. The democratic ideal at stake here is the situation in which "[t]he addressees of law must be in a position to see themselves at the same time as authors of those laws to which they are subject" (1995, 852). An important consequence, for my concerns here, is that all citizens must thus not only be able to understand the languages of the laws (in which the role of translation is obvious) but should also have the languages necessary to ensure participation in the processes by which laws are authored. That is, the citizen should have whatever languages are required to vote and more generally to act in the public sphere: some modes of linguistic access come via translation (minimally of the laws), others via language learning if necessary (minimally for general authorship processes such as voting and understanding what a vote is about). A society of radically separate communities not only cannot guarantee such modes of access, but would theoretically require few of them.

The key to Habermas's reconciliation of these positions, at least in these texts from the 1990s, is a certain division of the subject into levels of socialization. What happens on the level of law need not affect what happens on the level of cultural identity:

> immigrants should be obliged to assent to the principles of the constitution as interpreted within the scope of the political culture: that is, the ethical-political self-understanding of the citizenry of the receiving country. Once they become citizens themselves, they in turn get a voice in public debates, which may then shift the established interpretation of the constitutional principles. The obligation to accept the political culture may not, however, extend to assimilation to the way of life of the majority culture. A legally required political socialization may not have an impact on other aspects of the collective identity of the immigrants' culture of origin. (1995, 853)

That is, to think only in terms of language, you can learn and use the language of political participation and retain your languages of cultural identity. And that is precisely what many people do: they know and use more than one language. In language, unlike race, ethnicity, and class, you can have your cake and eat it too.

Such might be a linguistic reading of Habermas's defense of the European liberal state, as an instrument of modernity and inclusive justice. Despite the manifold injustices that have ensued from imposing the model of the Western nation state on the rest of the world, one might still argue, with Habermas, that liberal democracy remains our best bet of extending modernity with both freedom and human rights. One would hope this also explains something of why Habermas's sociology is based on a linguistic view of how people communicate. Regrettably, Habermas's pragmatics is concerned more with being rational and telling the truth than with managing any multilingualism, and his association of the liberal state with modernity remains generally silent with respect to the Romantic illusion of national languages corresponding to states. After all, that is precisely the illusion that, imposed on the rest of the world, institutes repressive regimes of national languages.

Habermas does nevertheless address the question of the multilingual state in a later text on "Equal Treatment of Cultures and the Limits of Postmodern Liberalism" (2005). Here we find a full-frontal critique of the argument that cultures have rights, and that languages might have rights as parts of cultures. The prime example is Quebec, where Habermas argues against the assumption that, in order to ensure the "right of the French-speaking citizens of Quebec to continue their ancestral traditions, it follows that the provincial government is obliged to use whatever measures are required to ensure the survival of the French language" (2005, 20), including the government's insistence that children be educated in French. Habermas's argument seems clear enough when he points out that this contradicts the parents' right to decide whether their children will be educated in French or English. That argument, however, is skating on thin ice once you recognize there are no rights prior to the constitution of sovereignty: to the extent that education is a communitarian, collective undertaking (and only to that extent), no individual can simply assume the right to decide the language in which they or their children are going to learn. The more serious argument turns on the status of cultures (or in this text "traditions") to be the bearers of rights in the first place:

> A culture is not suited to be a legal subject as such, because it cannot meet the conditions for its reproduction with its own power [and so] the survival of identity-groups and the continued existence of their cultural background cannot be guaranteed by collective rights at all. A tradition must be able to develop its cognitive potential, such that the addressees

> are convinced that this tradition is really worth continuing; and the hermeneutic conditions for the continuation of traditions can be guaranteed only by individual rights. […] Young people must be convinced that they can lead a rich and meaningful life within the horizon of the acquired tradition. (2005, 22)

The individual must thus be able to decide which tradition or culture they want to work within, or indeed which cultures they want to draw on and mix. In our terms, they should be offered languages, and then they decide which languages they want to learn and use. Note the worrying ambiguity of the phrase "young people must be convinced," where "convinced" could be an adjective (the state of those who are going to learn) or a verb past participle (someone has to have convinced them). On the latter reading, who should be doing the convincing? The young people themselves? The parents at home? The teacher at school? All three, for different languages, at cross-purposes? On this second reading, Habermas's critique could indeed justify separate classes for separate "traditions," if and when it is in the name of promoting the conditions whereby someone may be "convinced." More reasonably, though, this position would seek in education a process by which the available alternatives can be offered, so that the individual can then decide: "cultural groups can pass on their heritage from one generation to the next only by means of the hermeneutic filter of the affirmation by individual members who are in a position to say 'no' to a range of genuine alternatives" (2005, 22). And then, as a piece of paternal advice unaccompanied by any empirical evidence, Habermas assumes that "[a] dogmatically protected culture will not be able to reproduce itself, particularly in a social environment rich with alternatives" (2005, 23).

Thus naïvely convinced that dogmatism cannot work against modernity (but did he have genuine access to the alternatives?), Habermas is duly upset that the United States Supreme Court should have conceded to the request by a prime example of anti-modernity, the Amish, to enjoy collective exemption from the full ten years of required schooling. This, for Habermas, is a "violation of the civil rights of the youth to the basic education that would enable them to orient themselves within complex societies" (2005, 20). That is, presumes Habermas, students are not provided with enough skills and knowledge to be able to decide whether or not to work within inherited culture. When most of us, as educators, reflect on this particular case, it is rather more difficult to decide than is the provision of ethnic studies in Arizona. When a collectivity is helped by more

education, all goes well; when it is helped by less, we are not quite so much at ease.

Happily, the counting of school years, like the calculation of skin color or class membership, lacks the layered volatility of language. Habermas, we have seen, seeks a situation in which the individual can say "yes" or "no" to a tradition. In language, however, such binary choices are rarely necessary. Look at how theoretical problems are solved on the ground. The Amish, by all public accounts, are functionally trilingual: Hochdeutsch for their Bible, Pennsylvania German for their internal relations, and well-studied English for relations beyond the community. They can move between those languages, affirming each in its role, and their education allows them to manage the switches. Despite anti-modernity, their language regime might yet allow them to feel like the authors of laws.

As for French in Quebec, one hastens to note that Canadian policy is to protect both the English and French minority cultures in their respective areas, basically through second-language education. As such, individuals are indeed able to choose their language. In a study of French-English bilingualism in Montreal (reported in Holmes 2008, 177), it appeared that people have definite preferences for their L1 as students use both languages when advancing in their careers (when functional bilinguals actually earn more), then return to a more monolingual state from their late forties. That is, the languages are there, but how and why the languages are used depends very much on social circumstances, in this case, age. People can move in and out of languages, and education should enable them to do so.

Even within one language, the layers allow for multiples allegiances. I overhear university students in a Melbourne train saying "It's like awesome," adopting the syntax and lexis of Americanized youth culture yet at the same time highlighting the nasalization and flat vowels of a broad Australian accent, a home identity. In language, you can have your cake and eat it.

This, then, would be a second Habermasian solution to the problem of the individual vs. communitarian positions with respect to language: education, in the home and at school, should provide the skills and knowledge that allow the individual to decide which languages to use, on what levels, and in what mixes.

Of course, this is a weak solution, to the extent that it assumes a subject able to make some kind of free choice—as if choice were not itself subject to multiple modes of social conditioning (as is well known, successful language development or maintenance requires that considerable resources be invested to influence young people's free choices). Nevertheless, the individual's choice is certainly a more elegant and viable decision than is having legislators or academics impose a rational policy in a field where there are always more factors than they can control. And for my purposes as a researcher, the insistence on choice provides a serious opening to empiricism: we are obliged to see what people actually do with language, and we must then interpret any choice-based actions, without assuming the ubiquity of our own rationalism.

The Habermasian "individual choice" solution is also weak to the extent that it does not address the possible ethical or ecological status of languages as social goods, as ends in themselves, which is a notion that sits poorly with the general thrust of modernity. Languages have no rights. Habermas is thus not directly concerned with anything like language maintenance as such, with the value of multilingualism for a society's foreign relations and exports, or the calculations of the higher salaries of bilingual or trilingual professionals in certain fields. Such calculations can be made in the European Union and Canada, among other places (see, for example, Grin 1999, Grin and Vaillancourt 1999). And there is indeed something fallacious in an approach that assumes that since polyglots are paid more in a multilingual society, language is therefore a social good – if the society were monolingual, there would be no extra pay, so would language then not be a social good? Better mileage can be had from concerns with exporting in a global economy and enhancing national security, both of which require languages as entities in which investments are made and returns are achieved. All those calculations, all those reasons for a language to be seen as a social good, influence the individual's decisions about language use. Those factors are thus very pertinent and active, even though languages have no rights in themselves. I will now let those arguments lie, and move on to the particularities of translation.

The Role of Translation

The layered volatility that we find in language use (as opposed to measures of ethnicity, race, or years of education) also informs the social use of translation. This has been implicitly recognized in the growing use of the term "translation" to address precisely the problem of multicultural societies, where different groups would seek to understand ("translate") each other without assuming a common rationality (cf. Renn 2006). Flattering as such uses are, here I am more concerned with the pedestrian sense of translation as the constrained production of texts from other texts. Further, I am particularly concerned with the argument—which is common enough in some countries—that the state should not provide widespread translation services, since people should be made to learn the dominant language. If you use translations, you will not learn languages, or so the argument goes. There is something of this in Habermas: immigrants must first become part of the established polity, they must learn and use its language, before they can set about being the co-authors of new laws. Translation has little reason to fare well in Habermas, and one might perhaps rejoice that he has virtually nothing to say about it.

Professional translation might also be seen badly in terms of social economies: it is an expensive communication solution, typically used for and by the wealthy, quickly reduced in social services in times of economic recession (as has happened in Spain in 2011-12), and given to keeping languages separate, thus reducing the motivation to learn dominant languages and ultimately disempowering the disadvantaged.

So much for the more prevalent fallacies. The basic false opposition is between translation and language learning. There is, however, concomitant misunderstanding of translation as a luxurious mode of communication. For example, when the economists Ginsburgh and Weber (2011) ask "How Many Languages do We Need?," they do not have much to say about translation other than the assumption that its costs must be reduced. Their star bet is on the structural proximity of languages, which they think should allow not just cheaper translations but also significant intercomprehension in the absence of translations – all of which could constitute another set of fallacies.

My proposal here is that the key factor, for the above questions of both false divisions and exorbitant costs, is time. It all depends on how long your communication act is supposed to last.

Let us accept, for the sake of initial argument, that it is possible to achieve and maintain multilingual democratic involvement through either translation (which henceforth includes interpreting) or language learning (which includes a vast range of intermediary options such as the use of pidgins, creoles, code-switching, code-mixing, language shift, and intercomprehension). It is expensive to translate, but it is also expensive, in terms of effort and time, to learn languages. The trick is that the two expenses are structured differently. I take the liberty of reproducing (from Pym 2004, 147) a highly reductive graph that maps the fundamental difference: translation costs remain fairly constant over time, since translators are paid by the hour or page, whereas language-learning costs go down over time – you get better at a language, then progressively work less:
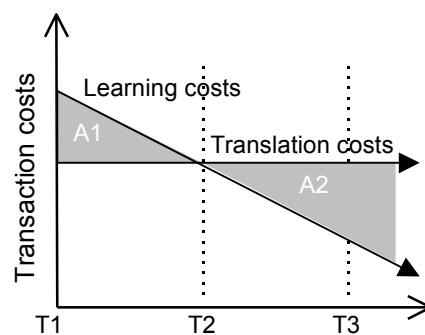
In the graph above, A1 indicates the area in which it is more advantageous to use translation rather than language learning (for relatively short-term interactions), while A2 indicates the area where language learning becomes more advantageous (for longer-term interactions). If the duration of the interaction is less than T2, you should use translation. If it is between T2 and T3 (the latter being the moment where A1=A2), you should use a combination of language learning and translation. For interactions that are longer than T3, language learning should dominate.

For example, an Olympiad is the four-year communication act that precedes the Olympic Games, which are at least bilingual (French and English, although there were four official languages for the Barcelona Olympiad). Given this time span, it

makes sense not only to translate most official documents (as I was employed to do in Barcelona) but also to give advanced language classes to the main local officials (as I also did in Barcelona). A similar logic can apply to political involvement: since a law is a momentary performative, in theory, each law can be translated without undue expense. Even when the set of performatives is as huge as the *acquis communautaire*, which comprises more than 100,000 pages, the translation is still a one-off affair, not designed to extend over more than four years as a communication act. However, if we are talking about citizen involvement in parliamentary proceedings, the communication act should last as long as the state, and language learning of some kind will probably be required. A small but relatively rich democracy like Catalonia, with a population of just over 7 million, might thus invest considerable resources in the maintenance of its national language, using translation (mostly dubbing) for its two television channels, providing free language classes, and indirectly subsidizing the publication of books translated into Catalan. A much larger multilingual democracy like South Africa, with 11 official languages but a lack of resources for many aspects of public education, has to be much more astute in its investments in translation, and is consequently subject to a highly unequal distribution of resources and educational opportunities across languages.

If the fundamental aim is to ensure that all citizens can feel they are "authors of those laws to which they are subject," then short-term translation will not suffice. We can translate the laws of the European Union or of South Africa into as many languages as we like, but the users of those target languages will not thereby be positioned as anything like authors. They are simply subject to the laws, and subjected through translation. On the other hand, if translation is used as a long-term solution in societies that do not have sufficient resources, an over-ambitious multilingualism constantly risks back-firing, revealing the asymmetry of opportunities between languages and leaving the main lingua franca as the only language that is learned and thus the only one suitable for participation in the authorship of laws (on which logic, see De Swaan 2004).

In short, something is wrong if translation becomes a long-term communication strategy—politically wrong and ecologically wrong. On the other hand, everything is right if it is used astutely in short-term communication acts.

That, of course, is deceptively neat. The next point to be made is that there is no clean division between language learning and translation. This can be seen in the

few examples I have enlisted above. When the Catalan government invests in its Catalan-language television channels, especially in children's television, it is using massive translation in order to produce not only the materials in which the Catalan language is learned by many, but also the symbolic values by which the language acquires the virtues of diversion and modernity—Catalan is cool, and young people consequently choose to use it. The translation strategy is thus a significant part of a very successful (albeit expensive) language-learning policy.[1] Similarly, when the *acquis communautaire* is translated into Turkish, for example, the translation act is also the creation of a whole legal terminology in the target language, in part forming a language to be learned by future practitioners. In another respect, there is a growing body of evidence that the use of dubbing allows incidental language learning (receivers are aware of the spoken start language, even while they are reading the target language)—again, translation is part of language learning. So it is not just a question of deciding whether or not to translate. The trick is to know when to translate, and how to relate translation to language learning as a long-term strategy.

I believe there is reason for considerable optimism in this regard. This is not particularly because waves of immigration are producing new bilingual and bicultural groups, nor because I invest blind faith in public policies that seek to promote bilingual education—when costs are cut, language is rarely a priority. I draw a more specific kind of optimism from the hope that new technologies will transform the way translation is used in our societies, allowing it to break out from the relative restriction to short-term communication.

Professional translation is traditionally an expensive service because of the highly asymmetric social distribution of language competence. Many people may learn an L2 well enough to use it passively or to engage in intercomprehension, but only a few learn it well enough to work as professional translators and interpreters. Those few are usually from moderately privileged social classes, able to pay for expensive training programs and thus to command appropriate fees for their services. So translation is expensive.

That logic begins to falter when new social groups are able to undertake translation on a voluntary or semi-professional basis. This has long been the case of bilinguals from minority or immigrant communities, who grow up using two or more languages and are called upon to translate informally. The problems of using such translators are well-known, first because of the often non-written

nature of heritage language transmission, but also because the lack of formal training in translation leaves bilinguals stranded in the face of numerous linguistic and ethical dilemmas. There are many people who are able to translate (just as everyone can sing, to some degree); just a few can do it well and professionally. This is precisely what can be expected to change through the impact of new technologies.

The most important of those technologies is the web-based machine translation (MT) services that are now freely available on the Internet. Easy to use (and to misuse), they offer serious change, particularly when integrated into translation memories (TMs). This is because they are based on statistical matches, in addition to linguistic algorithms developed by traditional MT methods. Without going into technical details, the most important features of the resulting systems are the following:

- The more you use them, the better they get, in theory. This would be the "learning" dimension of TM/MT.

- The more they are online ("in the cloud" or on data bases external to the user), the more they become accessible to a wide range of public users, and the more they will be used.

These two features are clearly related in that the greater the accessibility, the greater the potential use, and the greater the likelihood the system will improve its performance. In short, these features should create a virtuous circle. This could constitute something like a revolution, not just in the translation technologies themselves but also in the social use and function of translation. Statistical MT is now at a level where relative beginners with minimal technological training can use it to attain productivity and quality that is comparable with fully human translation, and any gains should then increase with repeated use. On the other hand, that virtuous circle can be countered by the vicious circle that results when novices post raw MT outputs, which are then fed back into the memories, and the whole pack of cards comes tumbling down. A little judicious training can thus be put to good use, although that training is by no means of the kind that has traditionally been restricted to an elite corps of translators and interpreters. In principle, with minimal technological prowess, everyone can produce a flawed translation then work on it to reach a degree of quality.

The second technological change comes from the way translation technologies now make it very easy to work on a text collectively, alongside others, as a social act. A series of tools like Lingotek and Google Translator Toolkit now join machine translation to translation memories in such a way that a team of translators can benefit immediately from the renditions of all members, and can discuss the translation as they go along. Something similar is found in the software and social networks used by volunteer subtitling groups, where individuals work on translation not in exchange for economic capital but as a social activity, as fun, and as a way of engaging with cultural products from a different language. Or again, perhaps better known, the collective volunteer translating of Facebook into many languages used a system where alternative renditions were proposed and the users of the software, as a community, voted on which ones should be retained. Much as one might carp at the financial tricks of crowdsourcing, where some people work for free and others accumulate the rewards, the exchange is entered into freely and, more important for our purposes, that community of multilingual users might have some cause to feel they are authors of their own software (or website, or subtitles, or translation).

In situations of relative technological competence, we may be moving towards a situation where translation is a far more generalized activity, open to many, and not carried out primarily for economic exchange. High-level, expensive translation can and should be used to render the laws of multilingual societies, and to ensure cooperation in high-risk circumstances. However, there should also be numerous lower-level spheres in which translation becomes not just part of general language-learning activities, but more particularly a way of engaging collectively with utterances produced in other languages. That degree of involvement will hopefully move translation into the field previously reserved for language learning, as one of the main ways in which multilingual democracies can create and maintain a sense of the collective authorship of laws.

In sum, it is not a question of the individual vs. ethnic groups. The space of translating translators, of the overlaps and multiple transfers, should itself grow with technology, blurring the borders upon which the original problem was badly posed.

Editors' Note: A link to the talk upon which this essay is based, from April 15, 2012, is available here.

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[1] The conscious use of translation for language learning in Catalonia is manifested in the strict linguistic rules imposed on the translators, who are supposed to work only into "standard" Catalan, in fact imposing the dominant variety and ignoring the Catalan/Spanish code-switching that is very much a part of many spoken conversations in Catalonia. My limited and informal experience of South African television, on the other hand, suggests that little is done to promote translations into languages other than English and Afrikaans, and the content produced in those languages offers exuberant code-switching with English.