



## **Babel and Globalization: Translating in the 21st Century**

### *Introduction*

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Translations have historically maintained an essential role in the diffusion of knowledge, culture, arts, and sciences across national and cultural borders. This article introduces the special section on translations, situating the analysis within the unfolding globalization phenomena that have fostered an international communication milieu in which English is increasingly the lingua franca in academic, economic, technological, and popular culture domains. This special section delves into the craft and challenges of translating in the 21st century, contributing to shed light on the work and vital role of translators and translations. It provides, at the intersection of diverse fields of academic inquiry and theoretical frameworks, a venue for scholarly contributions sharing an interest in translations and their relevance in the global communication landscape.

*Keywords: translation, communication studies, globalization*

In 2014, I had the pleasure to chair the workshop/panel “Not Lost in Translation: Experiences in Communicating Across Different Cultures and Languages” at the International Communication Association annual conference in Seattle, Washington. The panel encompassed communication scholars engaged in research that relates to translating who met and shared their work and their analyses on the role of translations and translators in the 21st-century international communication landscape.

The triggering event that prompted me to propose and organize this specific workshop/panel was a translation I had just completed: I had been invited by the publishing house FrancoAngeli to translate into Italian my book *The Digital Glocalization of Entertainment* (originally published in English by Springer Science + Business Media), which analyzes the role of local adaptations of media texts in an increasingly digital global mediascape, its roots and consequences (Sigismondi, 2012, 2014). Not being a professional translator, my translation proved to be a more challenging, but also a much more fascinating undertaking

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than I had anticipated, although familiar with the source text, as I was its author, and fluent in the target language, Italian. My personal experience of translating as an immersion in the practical endeavor of connecting a text between two different languages bridging existing gaps between distant semantic environments, and the literature review and research on translation that preceded and accompanied the project, motivated the proposal of the panel. As I learned in retrospect, I barely met the threshold proposed by Eco (2001) to contribute to discussions on translations, as he recommends that “translation scholars should have had, at least once in their life, both the experience of translating and that of being translated” (p. 5; in my case, the event occurred simultaneously).

The goal of this special section is to continue and expand the lively and thought-provoking conversations at the International Communication Association conference by proposing some of the discourses, ideas, and papers originated in that venue to the larger audience of the readers of the *International Journal of Communication*, and by enriching the analysis with contributions from scholars whose research is rooted in other disciplines, in particular translation studies, who did not have the opportunity to attend the conference, which usually attracts primarily communication scholars. The approach of this section is thus intentionally interdisciplinary, embracing scholar inquiries from a variety of disciplines that intersect with translating, using different theoretical frameworks, and proposing articles based on both empirical and theoretical work.

This collection of articles is not, of course, exhaustive in analyzing, explicating, and unraveling the complexities of translating in an increasingly globalized landscape. Nor does it intend to provide an alternative taxonomy of themes, issues, and ongoing discussions originated when the necessity/opportunity of translating arises, already brought to the fore and thoroughly illustrated by an evolving body of literature in translation studies (see, for example, Bassnett, 2014; Eco, 2001, 2003; Munday, 2012; Pym, 2014), and already analyzed and enriched by specific contributions within the context of the phenomena ushered in by globalization processes (Cronin, 2003).

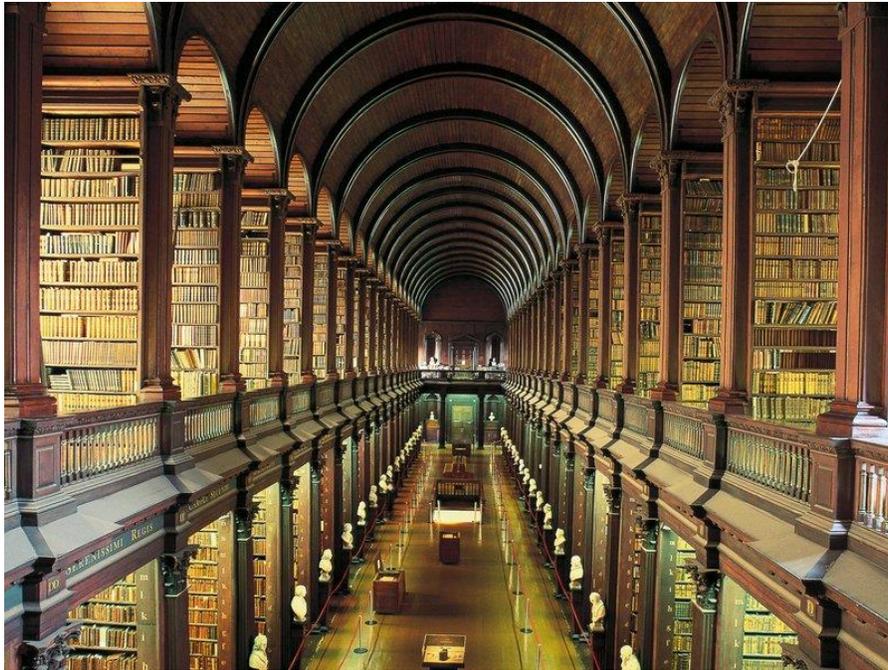
Rather, its goals are to share ideas and discourses initiated with colleagues at the International Communication Association conference that appeared to be worth presenting in a more public and open-ended venue, and to offer a contribution in conjunction with translations studies scholars, on a much larger scale than a conference hall, to discussions aimed at understanding the role, art, craft, and challenges of translating in a 21st-century communication landscape shaped by unfolding globalization forces at the intersection of diverse fields of academic inquiry and theoretical frameworks. As a result, this section does not intend to provide a conclusive and final view, but to contribute to conversations on the topic, reaffirming the centrality of translations and translators in the current evolving global communication landscape.

It specifically aims at fostering a dialogue among scholars from different strands of inquiry, oftentimes internationally connected yet divided by the invisible walls of separate academic fields even when focusing on common issues and while sharing similar theoretical frameworks on the specific topic of translations. We are convinced of both the central relevance of this issue in a more and more globalized communication landscape, and of the beneficial contributions to its analysis stemming from interdisciplinary lenses of inquiry, especially at the intersection of communication and translations studies,

because, as translations studies scholar Munday (2012) put it, "translation is above all about communication" (p. 297).

Translations have historically maintained a central role in the diffusion of knowledge, culture, religions, arts, and sciences across national and cultural borders. Although the globalization processes have fostered an international milieu in which English is increasingly the lingua franca in popular culture, economic, technological, and academic conversations alike, distances and differences among cultures still remain, and translations retain a central role in international communication. The landscape is, however, evolving at the turn of the 21st century.

### **The 21st-Century International Communication Landscape: An Evolving Global Babel**



***The Library of Babel, Jorge Luis Borges (Deagostini/Getty Images).***

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Bassnett (2014) captures the nature of translation as a "movement across time and also across space. It is a kind of journey, beginning at one point and moving across borders, itself a far from innocent or politically neutral activity, and it is a textual process that involves encounters between languages" (p. 173) and identifies "the Twenty-first century as the great age of translation" as an unprecedented number of individuals crossing the globe because of vastly different circumstances encounter "other languages, other cultural frameworks and other belief systems," rendering this an historical moment when translation is "an increasingly human condition" (p. 1).

Encounters between individuals crossing national and cultural boundaries, as well as different languages, have been recorded and documented since biblical times, and could be considered an essential part of human history. Over the ages, people have been moving from their original milieu for a variety of reasons: driven by trade, to avoid persecutions, to fight wars, in the search for opportunities, and to start a new chapter in their life journeys, just to name a few. The extent of these movements of people crossing borders in the past decades has been, however, unprecedented, as a result of the phenomena of globalization, which is still unfolding. It is creating a new "ethnoscape" defined by Appadurai (1990) as

the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups and individuals constitute an essential feature of the world and appear to affect the politics of and between nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree, (p. 297)

not without clashes, controversies, and casualties, as the migration waves and the displacement of thousands of individuals occurring at the time of this writing at the borders of the European Union remind us.

The world population has been growing consistently, albeit at different rates, for centuries. It reached the 7 billion mark in 2013 and continues to grow. A study of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (United Nations, 2013) estimates that the world population is expected to reach 9.6 billion in 2050 and 10.9 billion in 2100. Whereas the population of this planet has been growing and is expected to grow further in the foreseeable future, the number of languages spoken by this growing number of individuals has been diminishing, and it is expected to diminish even further. Ongoing research from UNESCO monitors the evolution of the languages around the world with particular focus on those in danger of extinction, estimating that, should nothing be done, half of the 6,000 languages spoken today will disappear by the end of this century (Moseley, 2010).<sup>2</sup>

The slow, seemingly inexorable, disappearance of languages is raising concerns about, and the above-mentioned study aims at creating awareness of, the potential loss of these communication tools, which are at the core of the different cultures of the world we live in. Languages reflect profoundly the cultural environment they represent, displaying and providing access to only the semiotic tip of the iceberg of all the wisdom, practices, and knowledge originated over the course of time in a specific cultural environment. As Cronin (2003) points out, "an essential element of plurality in the world is language difference [and] the limited possibility for genuine understanding and the vulnerability which results from aggressively monoglot views of the world" (p. 3).

In the current international communication landscape, English has become a hyperlanguage, used as a communication tool above and beyond its semiotic origins. Its international distribution, it could

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<sup>2</sup> The UNESCO *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* (in its interactive online edition available at <http://www.unesco.org/culture/en/endangeredlanguages/atlas>) specifically monitors and updates on a regular basis the unfolding phenomenon, providing the status of the languages of the world based on their locations.

be argued, has reached a "tipping point" after which it is generating network externalities, as pointed out by Heath and Potter (2004, p. 247).<sup>3</sup> English is then increasingly the lingua franca in academic, economic, technological, and political discourses, and also in media flows crossing the globe, including both legacy media and new media.

In such a linguistic landscape, it is not surprising that this special section on translations is published in English, whereas a large share of its contributions (and reviews) originates from scholars who are not native English speakers. They live "between cultures" and navigate the negotiated waters of translating and interpreting in their daily lives and professional careers as bilingual or multilingual scholars. In a similar way, this section aims at capturing this essential element of negotiation intrinsic in translation activities, adopting it as an epistemological position in exploring the complexities of an evolving global communication landscape. It intends to bridge gaps between diverse theoretical standpoints, while acknowledging differences in academic backgrounds, to foster conversations and contributions on the topic of translations stemming from different fields of academic inquiry.

#### **Emerging Paradigms, New Technologies, and Encounters in Translation: Contributions**

In the opening article, Silvio Waisbord forges new connections between the fields of communication and translation studies focusing on the translatability of communication scholarship, situated at the intersection of different strands of inquiry in humanities and social studies, in the context of globalized academia. Translation is thus used as an analytical framework to bring to the fore discussions on the globalization of academic cultures, possible international interconnections and exchanges, or lack thereof, in communication studies and beyond. In his contribution, Yves Gambier sheds light on and puts into perspective the evolutions of the practices and research in a field experiencing a multitude of terms to indicate "what was once translation," identifying and analyzing two paradigm changes. The paradigm of equivalence has been replaced by the paradigm of the cultural turn, and the very translation platforms and media are changing, from the printed book paradigm to the digital paradigm.

A stream of contributions analyzes the role and the impact of evolving technologies on translations and the international linguistic landscape as a whole, focusing in particular on changes ushered in by digital technology. Karin Littau's contribution charts the trajectories of translation's history intertwined with evolving technologies and their impact on translation activities, situating our understanding of translation comparatively to its relations to the mediascapes of the past, present, and future. It illustrates the digital futures of the field, and in particular the role of nonhuman agents such as the impact of computational media. Minako O'Hagan's article situates the analysis of current evolutions and practices of translation within the relationship between technology and translation in the globalization

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<sup>3</sup> The value of a language would then be "heavily determined by the number of the other speakers whom one can use it to communicate with" according to the authors, who also point out that of the aforementioned 6,000 different languages, more than 1,500 are found in Papua New Guinea, and are being spoken by only a very limited number of individuals (Heath & Potter, 2004, p. 247).

processes unfolding in the 21st century, drawing on the framework of critical theory of technology. It specifically analyzes and brings to the fore the development of translation as a mass, open, and collaborative task, which is defined as “massively open translation.” Stephen Doherty’s article focuses on the development and resultant impact of two major technological developments of contemporary translation: computer-assisted translation tools and machine translation. It analyzes the advances these developments have ushered in as well as the new challenges and uncertainties to the translation industry and profession.

Another stream of contributions highlights the relevance and the centrality of the role of translators, focusing on different aspects and the challenges of this evolving profession at the turn of the 21st century. Vanessa Enriquez Raido analyzes the role of translators as highly multitasking agents whose job requires multiple competencies: from language skills to information literacy, and increasingly more technological competence. Despite the challenges provided by evolving technologies relying on, for example, powerful automatic implementation and volunteer crowdsourcers, the author illustrates how professional translators continue to adapt to the evolutions of the international translation environment. Hanna Risku and colleagues focus on the current task of the translator, mostly operating as freelancer on a project-by-project basis as a consequence of globalization and corporate restructuring processes, and oftentimes remotely via computer. Their contribution, enriched by a case study, examines and explicates how the communication process between clients and translators is being shaped by the different expectations and views, and their impact and influence on the translation process and the translation as a whole. In her contribution, Catherine Way focuses on the profound changes in the legal translation profession, its role in society, and the consequences for legal translator training. After an overview of legal translation throughout history, the article analyzes the most important challenges and opportunities unfolding for legal translators and for legal translator trainers.

Other contributions bring us historical analyses and case studies rooted in different regions of the world, from Asia to Europe. Jack Qiu’s contribution illustrates the significance and the role of cultural translators in the development of communication studies in greater China through the analysis of the work of two prominent scholars: HE Daokuan (何道寬) at Shenzhen University in Mainland China and FENG Chien-san (馮建三) at National Chengchi University in Taiwan. Katarzyna Sepielak presents a descriptive analysis of four multilingual fiction films voiced-over into Polish. The results of the study raise questions regarding the main assumptions of voice-over translation such as illusion of authenticity, voice-over isochrony, and the reasoning behind the literal synchrony. Lucia Salvato’s case study highlights the linguistic and cultural challenges that translating poetry presents to translators. The analysis is the outcome of a 2-year translating experience from German into Italian of more than 100 short poems written by contemporary Swiss-German poet Werner Lutz. In Rashmi Luthra’s contribution, the continuing tension between the necessity and impossibility of translation is explored within the context of the Kashmiri movement for self-determination, on the central term *azadi*, used by the different parties involved in the conflict appropriating the term within their own distinctive framing of politically motivated interpretations. Finally, the section includes Nike Pokorn’s review of the 2015 book *User-Centered Translation* by Tytti Suojanen, Kaisa Koskinen, and Tiina Tuominen.

### Conclusion: In Praise of the Translator

The complexities of an evolving 21st-century society, shaped by the unfolding phenomena of globalization, bring to the fore the necessity of *lato sensu* translators, connectors among different networks of knowledge who can bridge existing gaps not only between linguistic landscapes, but also between different semantic and semiotic environments. The role and competencies of these connectors are central in the international communication flows and contraflows: In a world increasingly shaped by distinct, globalized networks (Castells, 2004), which oftentimes do not intersect and are not necessarily aware of each other's presence (let alone their relevance and acceptance) as they operate on an inclusion/exclusion basis, the role of those who can effectively connect these different networks becomes essential. They break existing silos (of knowledge, research, cultures, etc.) contributing to advances in society and to the comprehension, and acceptance, of "the other." For example, translating academic research into practice, usually referred to as "translational research," in many different fields generates tangible, ground-breaking results, such as in medicine, where it leads to "the 'bench-to-bedside' enterprise of harnessing knowledge from basic sciences to produce new drugs, devices, and treatment options for patients" (Woolf, 2008, p. 211).

The role of translator shifts then from the *traduttore traditore* (translator traitor) paradigm to the one of chief negotiator, whose skills are increasingly necessary to navigate a complex, multilayered, and multisemiotic global landscape. Whereas economic and technological forces appear to drive to an increasing invisibility of translators (Venuti, 2008), this special section praises instead the centrality of their role. The translator represents, in fact, an essential connector in a multitiered and multilayered global landscape. As Cronin (2003) reminds us,

the role of the translator is thus more real and important than ever, on a planet with an increasingly fragile biological and cultural ecosystem. As we enter a new century and millennium, translation is now truly the business of all. (pp. 74–75)

We hope that this publication will provide a contribution to shed additional light on the work and vital role of translators and translations in general, and, in the process, to an increased dialogue between academic disciplines, rooted in distinct academic traditions and specific national cultures, brought together in this special section by a shared interest on translation and its relevance in an evolving 21st-century global communication landscape.

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