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Translation at Work

Editors

David Katan
University of Salento and Trieste

Elena Manca
University of Salento

Cinzia Spinzi
University of Napoli Federico II and Taranto

Iconesoft Edizioni
Terni - Italy

Translation vs. Language Learning in International Institutions. Explaining the Diversity Paradox

Anthony Pym

Abstract

The diversity paradox may be expressed as an apparent contradiction between the rise of an international lingua franca, which should lead to lesser linguistic diversity, and increased use of translation, which should produce greater linguistic diversity. The paradox is that both these tendencies are occurring at the same time. It is suggested that one key to this paradox is to be found in the institutionalized nature of cross-cultural communication. Three models are presented of the way translation may operate within international institutions. One of the models, relying on a centralized production language and a multiplicity of target languages, is shown to be compatible with the diversity paradox.

1. Introduction

The more globalized we become, the more cultural hybridity we create and encounter, and the more we must translate, to the extent that translation is now all around us, everywhere, all the time. All language-use becomes translation; there is no fully available origin. Such tritely pious pronouncements abound in our cultural studies. They surely have every right to do so, since things are indeed changing, and the principle of ubiquitous translation does express something about what is changing. And yet:

Try to get a company to pay well for a well-done translation for the first time. Or try to get substantial financing (from a company or government) for a language policy that includes translation. Or try to find long-term stable institutional employment as a translator. Or try to go into a company, do a linguistic audit of its communication needs (the models are in Reeves and Wright 1996), and tell them to station a translator on every single cross-over point. Try those things, or find out how others try them, and you soon discover that there is a big gap between the kind of cultural translation that is always everywhere and the kind that actually attracts the investment of social resources.

Our cultural theories are not necessarily wrong. But they are a long way from the priorities of the everyday workplace.

Why this gap? Why is translation, of the financed kind, not always everywhere? The reason is fairly obvious: translation is only one of several things that can happen when the boundaries of languages and cultures are crossed. Worse, it is quite possibly the most expensive, indeed the most luxurious option. Here are some of the other things that can happen when we go beyond a common first language, if we may momentarily allow reduction to a border of two sides:

> -One side adopts the language of the other.
> -Both sides adopt a lingua franca.
> -The contact situation adopts and develops a pidgin (which may become a creole).
> -Both sides develop passive capacity in the language of the other (so both speak their own language).
> -Both sides learn each other's language and use code-switching.

There are certainly other options as well. José Lambert's seminal paper "La traduction, les langues et la communication de masse" (1989) presents a similar list. Lambert, however, uses highly colored terms in his description of the strategies, ranging from "genocide" (as a way of reducing the number of language communities, which does effectively solve the communication problem) to "complete translation", apparently in the name of a "democratization of languages" (1989: 223). For as much as Lambert then immediately claims that "there is nothing that permits us to assert that one of these solutions is by definition any better than the others" (1989: 224), few among us would openly assert the moral equality of genocide and democracy. Indeed, the terms Lambert presents are weighted heavily in favor of translation as a defense of democracy, as if there were no other modes of democratic defense. Here we should try to be a little more neutral in our assessment of the options.

In our modeling of the available options we need a less provocative term for the opposite of translation. Our choice here is for "language learning", which should be taken in the broadest possible sense, as including all five of the above alternatives. This simplifies the field and reduces the ideologies: either translation, or language learning (or a mix of both, of course). The opposite of translation could always be non-communication, but for the problem we are developing here, we will accept it as language-learning.

Now for the problem: If everyone learns languages, then this should reduce any need for translation.

We can make it more acute: If everyone learns the same lingua franca, then no one will need the intervention of a translator.

Or more specific: The more cross-cultural communication is dominated by English as the international lingua franca, the less one might expect to find the use of translation for cross-cultural communication.

Or simpler: If people can use the same language, they do not need to translate.

So what is the problem? Well, if these propositions were all true, then we would expect the global demand for translation to be declining at about the same rate as the use of English as a lingua franca is rising. However, what we find in the past few decades, according to all statistics, is a constant expansion of the translation market, running in parallel with the rise of English as the international lingua franca. This constitutes what we will call the diversity paradox: *the lingua franca would appear to be reducing linguistic diversity, translation should ideally be increasing linguistic diversity, and both are happening at the same time.*

We believe there is a good way of explaining the diversity paradox simply by looking at large-scale statistics. One might also address it through a series of qualitative case studies, such as might hopefully be found elsewhere in this journal. But it is probably more valuable to discard a few of the bad ways before we get there. In the rest of this paper we will unpack the propositions involved, discard a few weak answers, then present our solution to the paradox, all as briefly as possible.

2. The Evidence

The use of the lingua franca is increasing

Since the land of numbers is murky here, we might simply have to assume that the use of English is growing. There is also no doubt that the growth is in second-language speakers. This does not make English the most widely used language in the world, but it does make it the dominant language for commercial cross-cultural communication.

The market for translations is growing

The numbers are scarcely more eloquent for translations. We can however refer to the *Index Translationum* since 1932 (under the auspices of UNESCO since 1948, computerized since 1979), publishers' data reported in Ganne and Minon (1992), snippets of the same in Venuti (1995, 1998), yearly reports from the European Commission's Translation Service, estimates made by the American Translators Association and French official registers (cf. Gouadec 2002: 1), regular LISA reports on the growth of the localization sector in recent years. Drawing on a number of such sources, Boucaud (2005) estimates that the international market for translations is growing at a rate of between 5 and 7 percent. For the sake of an argument, we are inclined to accept that estimate.

Translations are for short-term relationships

Tricky numbers, again. The difference between translation and language-learning is not so much in the activities themselves, but in the timeframe within which the calculation is to be made. For a one-off or short-term contact, there is certainly no reason to learn a new language – it is much cheaper to employ translators or interpreters (Pym 1995). But if a long-term relationship is envisaged, it is more logical to learn a language. Translation costs do not diminish over time, whereas language-learning costs do (you get better at the language, even if you never become perfect). That much should be beyond argument.

Translations are relatively expensive

Life becomes a little more difficult in situations where translation is preferred for long-term relationships. The world's largest translation bureau, the Translation Service of the European Commission, now the Directorate General for translation, will tell you, at every available opportunity, that the cost of their services is approximately the equivalent of one or two cups of coffee (perhaps plus a newspaper) per citizen per year. That is, a truly trivial sum, paid in exchange for a fully working multilingual democracy. So who could say that translation is expensive, even assuming that the European Union is a system of long-term relationships?

In a wide-ranging critique of what was then the European Community of 12, Coulmas (1991) calculated that even with the reduction of working languages the multilingual policy accounted for some 40% of the total administrative budget (which means it was about 2% of the total budget). In 1999 an alternative calculation put the total cost of translation and interpreting services at € 685.9 million, which would be only 15% of the administrative budget (see Wagner 2002). The numbers fluctuate enormous, but either way, considerable sums are involved.

Consider, alternatively, a few calculations of how much is paid for each page of output (be it redaction, translation or revision). For example, in the aforementioned Translation Service "in 2003, 1109 full-time translators produced 1416817 pages" (reported in Parada & Diaz Fouces 2006: 54), and the total cost of the translation and interpreting service was 325 million euros (53n.). These are the kinds of numbers that the EU bureaucrats flash in your face to convince you that multilingual Europe only costs the price of a coffee. But just divide the number of pages by the total cost: each page of output was costing something like 155 euros (which roughly compares with 175.5 euros in 2001, reported in Stecconi 2002). Per page. The most a localization company could charge per page, of anything, would be under 50 euros. Of course, the Translation Service provides all kinds of internal security guarantees and quality controls, plus a complex management system for many languages and diverse genres. A luxury product indeed.

So much for the propositions we need in order to proceed: Language learning is increasing: the translation market is growing; translations are logically for short-term relationships, and if not, they are a luxury option.

3. Discarded objections

To make this useful to public debate, let us briefly sideline a few arguments that we find less than useful:

You can't learn all languages....

There might be about 6,000 languages in the world, and no one can learn them all. So if you are going to communicate with speakers of languages other than yours, sooner or later you are going to need translations, or so the argument runs. Qualitatively, the observations are quite correct. Quantitatively, however, there can be no suggestions that all languages are operating in the same way here. Check the *Index Translationum* on the most translated languages; or take any particular language and see what languages it receives translations from. What you find is that most translations come from the central pivot languages, notably English, and very few languages receive substantial flows from more than four or five other languages. That is, translations are not servicing relations between all the 6,000 or so languages. What we find is more like the world system of languages outlined by De Swaan (2001, working from Wallerstein 1975-1989, applied to translation by Heilbron 1999, 2002). Some languages are peripheral and serve local purposes; others are more central, in the sense that they create exchange relations with other languages; and a handful of languages are super-central, in that they form pivots between many other languages, becoming clearing houses of translations.

In a sense, the world system of languages operates in such a way that the relations formed by translations are similar, in terms of directionality, to those formed by language learning. The differences then lie in the time frames and, correspondingly, in the proportion of a community that is available to learn a given foreign language. If a movement is short-term and for a language that is not well known, then translation is the obvious solution. But those cases are quantitatively nowhere near the possible 6,000 languages we could learn from.

You don't really understand....

A similar argument proposes that language learning is mostly imperfect, since only rarely does one ever truly master a foreign language. One might operate in that language, and even believe that one understands everything perfectly, but the understanding will always remain less than ideal. In order truly to understand, so runs the argument, you require the services of only highly trained professional mediators, called translators or interpreters.

Again, this argument is qualitatively correct and quantitatively unimportant. Several things are wrong. First, not all translators and interpreters supply the high-quality expertise that is assumed of them, and one might doubt that the rise in the number of translations has accompanied any increase in the professionalization o the translation market. Second, vast quantities of texts do not require profound understanding; they are used in a perfunctory way. This would seem to be indicated by quality assessment methods in the localization industry, where a certain number of errors are allowed, and high quality work is achieved by making the client pay for one or two extra revisions. Third, the progressive integration of translation memories and data-driven machine translation means that translation outputs, as such, are not of high quality and are not based on human understanding of textual relations – quality will increasingly ensue from human revision processes, not translation. Fourth, the logical consequence of all the above is that low-quality translation can be used to isolate the high-risk segments or passages, and those parts are then translated in a full and professional way. Fifth, recourse to translators does not involve any learning process or dialectic by which the end user might improve their understanding of the foreign language; it will simply create greater dependence on the intermediary. And sixth, postmodern philosophies of language accept that we do not fully understand texts anyway. Indeed, the whole argument against language learning is based on an illusion of perfect communication, which serves as a useful myth for the professionalization of translators but does not help us think about the way translation relates to language learning.

English is the killer language…

There is little evidence that the growth of English as a lingua franca has a direct cause-and-effect relationship on the alarming weakening and death of many of the world's more peripheral languages. The vast majority of the world's speakers are multilingual; they manage repertoires of languages where those used at work is usually not those used at home; language death begins when there is leakage in the home domain, not when there is a learning process at work. One might argue, of course, that the addition of a further lingua franca to the repertoire means that some other language, usually a peripheral one, is going to be eliminated from that same repertoire. That makes sense. But people do have the right to make such choices, and their choices do not always go against the home domain.

In his analysis of the European language system, De Swaan (2001) makes the case that the more languages are used in a geographical area, the greater the push for a lingua franca. That is, the use of English as a pivot language is a consequence of linguistic diversity, rather than an alternative.

One could also argue that the growth of English is a consequence of improved communication and transportation technologies (the basis of globalization), and that those same technologies pose the greatest threat to small peripheral languages, since they tend to undo the networks of small communities. That is, the same technological cause is behind the use of the lingua franca and the increase in language death. English alone is not the killer.

Can translation enhance the survival of peripheral languages? Undoubtedly. When Bible translators, for example, have to choose which of many local varieties is going to be translated into, they are in fact condemning the other varieties to a more likely death. This is because the translation process gives the language a standardized form, a script, a passage into print and more recently into electronic representation. That is, the translation process supplies the technologies that carry language over distance. For that matter, so do institutionalized language-teaching processes. It is not the translating itself that determines life or death, nor the giving of language lessons, but the technologies implied in both.

Having dispensed with the bar-room debates, let us seek a neater answer to the problem. This will come by considering a few general features of international institutions, not because they are any more enlightened, but because they bring out a feature that has so far been missed.

4. Why look at international institutions?

Cross-cultural communication concerns the spheres of commerce, science, technology, information services, cultural content and personal relations. Public non-profit organizations might seem to form only a small segment of this broad range, even when they are of the order of the United Nations system or the European Union institutions. But there are good reasons for paying special attention to such institutions. By their very nature, they embody a collective being, with rich complexes of public ideologies, open to debate and evolution. If most contemporary governments are reluctant to legislate what languages an individual should speak, few generally extend the same freedom of choice to major institutions. Indeed, for this very reason, public institutions are quite possibly the only bodies likely to be at all influenced by discussions about translation and language policy.

A second reason for looking in this direction is that there are many more institutions of this kind than meet the eye or make the press. The Yearbooks of International Organizations regularly list more than 30,000 non-profit organizations active all over the world. These are divided into about 25,000 international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and just over 5,000 intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), although other sources give much higher numbers for IGOs. This distinction is of some importance for cross-cultural communication. The governmental foundations of IGOs tie those institutions to the nation-states and their corresponding national language policies. IGOs, from the United Nations system down, typically privilege multilingual policies for symbolic reasons, although they then attempt to reduce the high translation costs that ensue from those policies. NGOs, on the other hand, rarely have the funding necessary for symbolic translation practices; their use of translation is closer to what might precariously be termed “real needs”; they are far less likely to employ in-house staff translators or interpreters. In short, there are two quite different kinds of international institutions, and they sometimes solve their cross-cultural communication problems in quite different ways.

In what follows we will briefly run through some of the communication and language policies most in evidence in such institutions. We shall then draw strategies from the anecdotal.

5. Communication in international non-profit institutions

The differences between IGOs and NGOs are partly historical. If we look for distant antecedents of contemporary intergovernmental organizations, we would probably have to consider the structures of the classical multicultural empires, with their mixes of imposed lingua francas and respected national languages. Imperial translation operated as a means of often symbolic unification. In Europe, the largely cultural Holy Germanic Empire might be one kind of background for the use of translation such as we find it in the European Union institutions, where the central political figure is traditionally weak, much decision-making power remains with the major nation-states and with their preferred languages, and translation foregrounds the symbolic plurality of those languages. Intergovernmental undertakings in specific fields might nevertheless also be associated with the various military alliances that have required rather more efficient communication solutions. The weak imperial model beneath the many official languages of the EU institutions is thus not the same as the one justifying the more restricted use of translation in an alliance like NATO (which has English and French as working languages).

International non-governmental organizations, on the other hand, would probably have to seek their antecedents in the structures and practices of the multinational churches, where ideology, shared interests, and various senses of mission tend to override the symbolic values of language loyalty. Although there are obvious and important differences between the Latin of Catholicism, the Classical Arabic of Islam, the Hebrew of Judaism, or the American English of various evangelical groups, the international churches tend to use translation as a means of radiating out from a main source or central language (sometimes sacred) toward any number of peripheral target languages. Since this model combines centralized power structures and relative efficiency, it tends to be the general rule of NGOs, and indeed of restricted-domain IGOs such as the European Free Trade Association (which had English as its lingua franca). Further, the demands of efficiency increasingly bring about situations where language-learning policies (mainly the learning of the central language or languages) reduce the actual need for translation within the organizational structure. In such situations, translation may even be restricted to communication with external entities only.

The language policies of many IGOs remain officially based on the Romantic principle of "one nation, one language". This is despite the fact that the very rise of these institutions ensues from the decline of the nation state as an effective decision-making unit. More critically, Coulmas saw those costs as defending national languages against the growth of international English, concluding that "the [then] European Community has been used by member states to defend their languages' privileged position rather than being given the chance to produce a language policy of its own" (1991: 8). That critique may now be less justified, as the EU institutions progressively evolve into a more supra-national system able to impose a centralized pragmatism on member states. A similar gap between idealist democratic policy and motivated pragmatic restriction can be seen in the United Nations. The UN's six official languages (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish) represent different moments of international expansion rather than nation-states as such, yet few institutions within the UN system actually use all six languages.

Opposed to the pragmatic tendency to reduce the number of working languages and thus economize translational resources, there are firm ideological arguments in favor of widening the number of languages used and thus promoting increased use of translation. The very function of most IGOs, particularly within the UN system, is to check the power imbalances that would predominate in direct relations between nation-states. Indeed, since many disputes come to IGOs precisely because of different views and interpretations, the function of the institution must be to manifest the cultural and linguistic dimensions of those differences. Such arguments need constantly to be restated in the face of financial pressures.

6. Three strategies

The above overview has hopefully brought out an underlying conflict between what should ideally happen (the use of many equal languages) and what various criteria of efficiency mostly cause to happen (the use of just one or two central languages). At the end of the day, the main difference between IGOs and NGOs in this area may be that the former have to pay greater lip-service to multilingual ideals. However, cutting across those pragmatic tussles, there are several quite distinct strategies to be extracted. Two of those strategies correspond to the basic heads we have been using so far:

1. Language learning: An institution may choose one or two official languages, obliging speakers of other languages to learn and operate in them.

The learning of second or third languages thus obviates the need for translation of most kinds. Indeed, if analyzed in cost-benefit terms, language learning is by far the most efficient strategy for long-term relations, as we have argued above. Language learning is thus dominant within most scientific and technical organizations and in institutions with just two official languages (e.g. OECD or NATO). Yet it is also present to some extent whenever the number of official languages is reduced, as is the case of the United Nations or European Union institutions. Further, within the actual operations of even the most multilingual institutions, most technicians and experts converse freely in just one or two languages, often non-native to non-native, in the interests of efficiency. As a rule of thumb, the more technical the domain, the more one might expect to find language learning replacing the need for translation. In technical domains, understanding is a question of technical things, not necessarily of language systems as such.

2. Multilateral translation: The radical alternative to language learning is to have all languages translated into all other languages, such that the participants in cross-cultural communication may all produce texts in their first language. This is the fundamental idea behind the EU institutional maxim of "equal rights for all languages", which in practice means that all laws and outgoing documents of general application have to be drafted in all official languages (see Wagner 2002). The nightmare combination of transfers to and from all languages is nevertheless illusory, thanks to the practical reduction of working languages, as well as the growing use of pivot languages in translation and interpreting services. This means that complete multilateral translation is rarely to be found. In its place, we have a combination of language learning and translation.

So what might the third strategy be? If we may exclude the radical virtues of non-communication or telepathy, it would have to be some specific combination of language learning and translation. Here is what we find:

3. Translation from a central language: Criteria of efficiency mean that multilingual ideals are reduced by introducing a division between what happens within the central agencies of the institution (within its professional interculture) and what happens in relations with what might be termed client cultures (the relative monocultures whose languages are accorded official status by the institution). This division opens the way for one or two languages to be used on the inside, with translation limited to communication between the interculture and the monocultures. This is what we find in the major systems that nevertheless claim to have a multilingual policy, especially those of the European Union (Pym 1999). There are many sub-strategies involved here, including ab-

solute language learning (both passive and active) for institutional officials, and passive language learning for a slightly wider circle (so that EU parliamentarians, for example, can speak their own language but understand speeches in several languages). European intellectuals of the order of Claude Hagège (1992: 273) and Umberto Eco (1993: 292-293) have viewed passive language competence as the most viable path to democratic relations in an age of globalizing cultures. Yet what we find happening in most institutions is a more radical reduction of the lingua francas at work within the major intercultures, with degrees of centralization that have little correspondence with twentieth-century humanist ideals.

This third strategy is of extreme interest because it would seem to be the trend not only of international non-profit institutions such as we find them, but also of most multinational marketing. The discourses of localization (cf. Sprung 2000) are based on production in a central language, mostly English, then translation and adaptation into a wide range of target languages, with the latter determined according to market criteria. That is, what we find in the NGOs, and increasingly in the IGOs as well, is also the way of global capitalism. The third strategy would appear to be winning on all fronts.

7. The diversity paradox explained

This is not the place to predict whether the various combinations of language learning and translation are leading to the best of possible worlds. Our more humble purpose is to point out that the paradox with which we began, the apparent contradiction between the growth of a lingua franca and the growth of translation, is handled in a fairly non-problematic way by our third strategy. The lingua franca is growing within intercultures, translation is reaching out beyond them. If you want to produce global software or become a world leader, you will need some command of English, or whatever the next lingua franca will be. But then, thanks to translation in its most diverse forms, the software and the leadership may then reach a very wide range of cultures and languages. And the latter may indeed be strengthened by such movements.

We thus find that the growth of a lingua franca is compatible with the expansion of the global market for translation. QED.

Note

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