

## *Original Paper*

# A Reflective Account on Human Translation and Interpreting Faced with the Automated Text and Speech Processing Tools

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### **Abstract**

*This reflection aims to depict the prospective position and role of translation and interpreting in the globalised world. Demographic factors point to a long-lasting multilingualism, which reflects the co-existence of linguistic identities within a variety of settings. From schools, to workplaces and communities, different languages are and will continue to be in use. In many countries, there is an increasing wave of using vernacular and migrant languages in education. However, the current global academic discourse on language situations does not sufficiently reflect this new looming reality. The focus of translation and interpreting studies has traditionally been placed on those languages that were perceived as internationally important. One would assume that economic and diplomatic interests have influenced that approach and attitude. With changes affecting the globalised world in relation to the rise of some emerging economies and new resources, it is clear that the interlingual communication will be one of the greatest challenges of the coming age. In this regard, a new paradigm in overall language promotion and education must be formulated within which human translation and interpretation continue to be seen as important skills to be generally acquired.*

### **Keywords**

*translation, technology, interpreting, communication, multilingualism, interlanguage*

## **1. Introduction**

Translation and interpreting are some of the human activities that have been around for several thousand years and many people have devoted their efforts and lives to them. This is especially true for the last fifty years during which translation studies have been established as a subject worth of the attention of the academia (Bassnett, 2002; Munday, 2008). However, rather than the past and present

state of the translation art and its various technical aspects, the focus of this paper is the prospective position and role of translation in the present and future globalised world, an aspect of challenges that human translation and interpreting are facing vis-à-vis the automated text and speech processing tools. The current trends of international cooperation, national development and international migrations, the intensity of these processes or the lack of it, point to a long-lasting co-existence of hundreds of developed national communities with their own languages of national communication and education. These are demographic factors that are decisive for the existence of linguistic communities and one can fairly say that most of the communities that consist of compact populations of some five or more million people are likely to last for centuries. Moreover, globalisation is, indeed, closely intertwined with localisation, internationalisation with local human and societal development. These co-existing tendencies have their linguistic aspects.

While internationalisation supports a limited number of languages in use, the most obvious, but surely not the only one, being English, the inevitable reality is that the human development in local linguistic communities is bound to occur in local languages, the mother tongues or first languages of millions of people. Under those circumstances, it is unlikely and even inconceivable that quality international communication and acceptance of works of art and science as well as national education worldwide could take place in any single language, English being no exception. The process of globalisation is not going to bring about a linguistically homogenous global society. It will rather bring about a world with a considerable number of political and cultural power centres, each using their own languages.

## **2. Method**

The popularisation of the information technology in a globalised world has led to the new digital tools, such as electronic corpora, translation databases, memories, etc. Such technology advances have triggered new perceptions of human translation within the productivity-oriented perspective of emerging markets. Many researchers (Bowker, 2002; Jenkins, 2006; Munday, 2008; Hutchins, 2010; Pym, 2010, 2011; Doherty, 2016; Gentzler, 2016) have rightly started to reflect on the impact of automated text and speech processing tools on this human activity of translation and interpreting. Using secondary research data collected via the literature review, this paper analyses the trends and the impact of technology on the management of multilingual encounters. It makes a case for the need for academic and pedagogic interests in the synchronicity between human translation and interpreting activities and the automated text and speech processing tools.

## **3. Result**

### *3.1 Language Skills in the Academic and in the Public Perceptions*

Cronin (2012) examines the debates around the role of translation and interpreting within the context of emerging technologies. He analyses their social, cultural and political impact on the relationship

between human and the machine in the labour market. While technological tools have brought changes in translation to facilitate interlingual communication and increase productivity, “these tools also represent significant challenges and uncertainties for the translation profession and the industry”, (Doherty, 2016, p. 947). In the summary of *Translation in the Digital Age*, Cronin (2012) acknowledges that, Translation is living through a period of revolutionary upheaval. The effects of digital technology and the internet on translation are continuous, widespread and profound. From automatic online translation services to the rise of crowdsourced translation and the proliferation of translation applications for smartphones, the translation revolution is everywhere. The implications of this revolution for human languages, cultures and society are radical and far-reaching. In the information age that is the translation age, new ways of talking and thinking about translation which take full account of the dramatic changes in the digital sphere are urgently required.

In the academia, this debate is needed to reflect not only on the difficult relationship between human and the machine in the academic and public domain, but also and mainly on the pedagogic challenge of linking languages, translation and interpreting skills with employability in the digital age.

At present, academic and public discourse on language situations does not sufficiently reflect this looming reality, especially when compared with the disproportionate emphasis laid upon the danger of extinguishment of some, may be even many, small languages on the one side and on the predominant role of English on the other side. This is, arguably, not a matter of purely theoretical speculation. In the context of discussing the future of translation and interpretation it may be a fairly relevant issue.

Foreign language teaching and learning is, of course, in the foreground of many national and some international public discourses. Specifically, as we all are aware, through the Council Resolution on a European strategy for multilingualism (Council of European Union, 2008), the European Union recommended that each citizen of its member states, young or old, should be able to use their mother tongue and two other languages. Although the education and other authorities in many member states have already deployed considerable efforts to implement this policy, the practical implementation of this recommendation has not been an easy task. Even though there has been some moderate progress along these lines, the results have been partly satisfactory.

One should be aware that even as more and more people will have a command of two or three languages, it will be in most cases limited to relatively simple everyday communication and passive understanding of the texts providing basic information. It is important to have a clear awareness of the difference between such a broadly achievable level of partial individual bilingualism or plurilingualism and a relatively deep full-scale understanding of two or more languages and the skills required to work with and in those languages. While the lower level of plurilingualism is achievable in a multilingual context through the efforts of language teachers, training for quality communication on the higher level requires the engagement of institutions, including language schools, centres and departments in higher education. It is where another type of specially trained linguists comes to the scene: researchers, editors,

writers, teachers of languages and cultures, as well as translators and interpreters. There are also some special departments of translation studies or translatology.

Researchers have documented the pedagogic approaches to translation and interpreting (Bogucki, 2010; Bogucki, 2012; Bielsa & Bassnett, 2009; Williams, 2013) to professionalise the industry. Though specially trained translators and interpreters are usually supposed to get full-time jobs, a considerable part of existing translation and interpretation tasks is being undertaken by the rest of trained language professionals. In fact, whatever the great successes of language teaching in general will be, without a clear engagement and the availability of translators and interpreters, full timers and/or part timers, an ever-growing international communication will be difficult.

As far as translation of written texts is concerned, even in a hypothetical situation of a single powerful source language (e.g., English) from which texts would be fed to the rest of the world, there would be hundreds of target languages, requiring a one-way translation. In fact, such situation will hardly ever happen. The contrary can be expected. All significant languages will become both source and target languages in a complicated network of two-way translation processes. Therefore, one would suggest that interlingual communication will be one of the greatest challenges of the coming age and if the world of global markets is going to work, human translation and interpretation will have to be one of the key solutions and one of the key activities in that world.

It remains to be seen, how these activities will be distributed between people doing translation or interpretation full-time and professionals who devote to these activities only part of their time, though their contribution to the field may be highly sophisticated. Nevertheless, the current distribution of translation tasks suggests that human translation and interpretation will require several types of specialists.

Most official international talks and meetings cannot do, to be fully effective, with machines. There must be trained human translators and interpreters. Major Foreign offices have, to this end, their own staff. A large institutional body, the Directorate-General for Translation and Interpreting, does the job for the European Commission, in order to provide quality translations of all important official documents and interpreting in all important meetings.

### *3.2 Translation and Interpreting in Multilingual Societies*

Managing linguistic diversity in multilingual societies makes obvious that translation trainees should acquire the skill of seeking the effective dynamic equivalence from dictionaries, be they monolingual or bilingual. Talking about translation dictionaries, preparing good monolingual, bilingual and in some cases even trilingual dictionaries must be seen as a task closely connected to translation, not only by its very nature, but also as necessary support for good translators and interpreters. This task seems not so urgent when seen from the perspective from the widely considered main languages, such as English, French, German, Italian, Spanish or other big languages with some hundred years history of making sophisticated dictionaries. But if we look at it, for example, from the perspective of societies of the

sub-Saharan Africa, things are very different. In Rwanda, a 1,616 page Bilingual and Encyclopaedic Dictionary French-Kinyarwanda with Language, History and Culture, has just been published by Shimamungu (2018). In a country with one language to all three ethnic groups (Hutu, Tutsi and Twa), this dictionary may provide a strong basis for professional translation. In a Swahili speaking country like Kenya, one can find good Swahili-English dictionaries (with good explanations relevant for the expatriates rather than local people). There is also a concise Kikuyu-English dictionary. But what about other 60 dialects spoken by the 40 tribes, including the most dominant vernacular languages, such as Dholuo, Kikamba and Luhya? There is a similar linguistic landscape in Zambia which claims to have over 72 languages, including the seven official languages which are used in education and on the national television news channel: Tonga, Bemba, Nyanja, Kaonde, Luvale, Lozi and Lunda. The picture of providing translation dictionaries is even less promising in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) where there is an estimation of 242 tribal dialects alongside the official languages, such as Kikongo, Lingala, Swahili and Tshiluba.

Given the challenges faced with in meeting the professional language services demands in some multilingual contexts, it is clear that translation and interpretation in our globalised world comes to work in a variety of environments and circumstances. Some challenges are common to the whole field, some are specific to certain forms of these activities. It is therefore worth stressing two points.

First, both translation and interpretation affect the perceived quality of some other person's work or performance as well as the subsequent reaction of the recipient of the conveyed information to what he or she had learned or had been asked for. It is important to be always aware of the responsibility, often self-imposed moral responsibility, for translations and interpretations and always to improve the general knowledge, language competence and communication skills.

Second, we should be always aware, that as translators or interpreters, the ones who are able to listen and to talk to both sides in a situation where one participant does not know what the other is actually saying, we are in a position of considerable power. Power to build or power to destroy. Power to help or power to exploit. Power to encourage goodwill or power to seed suspicion and mistrust. Translation and interpretation are jobs that involve powers and pose moral issues.

#### **4. Discussion**

##### *4.1 The Shortcomings of the Automated Text and Speech Processing Tools for Translation and Interpreting*

It is widely recognised that the automated translation and speech processing tools have come a long way over the past years. The semantic accuracy of the text processing is unquestionable. Everyone should recognise the role that Google plays in providing multifaceted translation services for the widely spoken languages. However, while the technology has significantly improved the semantic accuracy in message transfers, it would be erroneous to assert that the machine is good enough to take over the role

of professional translation and interpreting from humans for different reasons.

First, translation and interpreting are integral parts of communication modes and processes. What this means in pragmatic terms is that while the intertext elements can be accurately conveyed by machines, inferences and other non-verbal communication features may not be picked up by technology. Technology may manage semantic and syntactic categories but may miss other features of situational and linguistic context. According to Nida (1964, p. 120):

Language consists of more than the meaning of the symbols and the combination of symbols; it is essentially a code in operation, or, in other words, a code functioning for a specific purpose or purposes. Thus, we must analyse the transmission of a message in terms of dynamic dimension. This dimension is especially important for translation, since the production of equivalent messages is a process, not merely of matching parts of utterances, but also of reproducing the total dynamic character of the communication. Without both elements the results can scarcely be regarded, in any realistic sense, as equivalent”.

In translators and interpreting, humans are more able to consider the role of context and inferences in communication.

Second, there may be cases of untranslatability (Large et al., 2018) or hidden parts of communication where the interpretation of utterances requires the intelligibility of human cognitive capacities. Such hidden parts of communication are more significant in interpreting than in translation. Gentile (Gentile, 1991, p. 30) argues that, “The role of the interpreter can be summarised as one where he/she is required to conduct himself or herself in a manner which makes the situation with an interpreter, as far as possible, similar to a situation without an interpreter”. Assuming Gentile (op.cit.) is not unreasonably ambitious in the perception of the role of the interpreter, one could argue that technology-driven interpreting constitutes some shortfalls: The subtlety of communicative encounters that are related to the various levels or dimensions (Hall, 1966) of discourse (intonation, gestures, rhetoric, speech acts, body language, proximity and other aspects of interaction) cannot be picked up by the technology.

Third, at least for now, it may be difficult to localise translation and interpreting applications for all lesser taught and lesser spoken languages. In some countries with a huge mosaic of dialects, there may be many sociolinguistic challenges due to the constant changes of language corpora that machines would not pick up. And yet, those countries with rare vernacular languages are globally important as they may form a new bulk of emerging international markets. Human resources are therefore still needed to fulfil the role of professional translators and interpreters.

#### *4.2 The Pressing Needs for Human Translation and Interpreting Services and Training*

The current trends in international migrations are likely to continue at a present, if not larger scale. Asylum seekers, job seekers, victims of human trade, foreigners in various troubled situations, most of them highly vulnerable, will continue to need the assistance and services of trained and understanding professional interpreters. With reference to seeking fairness in service provision in the judiciary, the

European Parliament (2010) recommends in article 2.1 on the Right to interpretation that “Member States shall ensure that suspected or accused persons who do not speak or understand the language of the criminal proceedings concerned are provided, without delay, with interpretation during criminal proceedings before investigative and judicial authorities, including during police questioning, all court hearings and any necessary interim hearings.” Interpreters play a pivotal role in facilitating communication. Given the scope of necessary knowledge they need to command and the respect in society they deserve, these professionals should be, perhaps, called communication facilitators rather than interpreters, a term sometimes coloured with disparaging connotations. On the side of the administration, it is first the judiciary who are in the need, for both practical and legal reasons, of translators and interpreters of many languages, for which they organize special networks. In a similar way, private translation agencies mediate between people or companies in need of translation and available persons who can accept ad hoc translation jobs generated at random by many subjects in a certain region.

Then there is the classical field of quality translation: literary translation. There is no doubt it will continue to flourish (Bassnett, 2011) and, as national cultures grow and develop, it will encompass more and more languages in, perhaps, rather unbalanced, bilateral exchanges. According to Bassnett (2013), translation is increasingly generating a diverse interdisciplinary activity and developing technologies and new forms of media will reinforce this burgeoning reality.

History shows that literary translations are often part of creative activities of writers and poets, but some people make with such translations their living. As far as academic translation is concerned, it will be probably partly done by interested individuals knowledgeable in their respective field, as well as by individual scholars interested in having their own work published in a foreign language or in having an outstanding foreign study in their field translated into their own language to spread knowledge in their country.

Finally, there are professionals who work with interpreters or translated material daily adapting information from a foreign source or several sources to produce new texts in the target language. This seems to be a common practice in the media. Similar kinds of tasks are performed by specialists in public relations and advertising. Furthermore, there is no doubt that due to the fluidity of social situations and of the market, the demand for human translation and interpretation can hardly ever be covered by specially trained staff employed full time. Anyone who has some knowledge of a foreign or second language can be confronted with a situation when his or her help may be needed, or, to put it the other way around, with an opportunity to be useful and often to earn some money. It may be therefore said that acquisition of some translating and/or interpreting skills would be profitable for anyone who has some knowledge of another language, and people in need of some assistance in foreign environment will naturally benefit.

Translation studies as a special subject can, therefore, be only part of the solution. What is needed, is training in translation and interpretation to be embedded into all language studies from a certain level up to graduation. To put it bluntly: added to training in speaking, listening, reading and writing skills, should be translating skills. Translating and interpreting skills are, indeed, a combination of either listening and speaking or reading and writing skills. However, translation will add the skill of searching for equivalent meaning and adequate expression. This new paradigm in formal language education would bring multiple benefits: It would make the learners more aware that learning languages is useful not only for the learners themselves, but that it contributes also to other people and society. It would make the learners more aware of the intricacies of bilingual communication and acquire new practical knowledge and experience.

It is, in fact a very down-to-earth, no rocket science matter, as can be seen from the following short extract from the *Reflections on Translation* by Bassnett (2011, p. 87):

When you are the person who knows the language and your companion does not, you are inevitably the interpreter. Sometimes this is straightforward, such as when you ask someone for directions and then translate them for the person who is driving. Restaurant menus can be a great source of entertainment, particularly if you have the menu in the local language and he has the menu in execrable English and keeps asking you to explain the translation”.

Another benefit of introducing translation into foreign language classes would be better coordination of foreign language teaching with mother tongue development. Intralingual translation as opposed to interlingual translation is, no doubt, part of didactical fundamentals. In high school one of the important tasks that is not always given the necessary attention is to implement awareness of the difference between everyday colloquial style and the syntactic structure of various types of written texts and teaching students the skill to use both in their right places.

Another positive effect of translation training in language classes would inevitably be more attention to all aspects of vocabulary, phraseology and mainly the true meaning of equivalence (Kenny, 1998; Vinay and Darbelnet (1958). Equivalence, according to Vinay and Darbelnet (op.cit., p. 42) “replicates the same situation as in the original, whilst using completely different wording”. In translation, equivalence has always been a central concept and yet remains the most controversial one among theorist and translators. In searching and/or explaining the validity of equivalence, theorists, linguists and critics such as Vinay and Darbelnet (1958), Jakobson (1959), Nida and Taber (1964, 1969), Catford (1965), Newmark (1981, 1988), Baker (1992), House (1997), Pym (1998, 2010) and others have meaningfully contributed to diachronic studies on the concept. Due to lack of consensus in relation to the relevance of the concept, heated debates have led to the use of many adjectives in association with equivalence: referential, denotative, connotative, (con) textual, text-normative, dynamic, formal, pragmatic, functional, etc. If in its early years equivalence was seen through the lenses of semantic oriented scope, it has been subjected to clear shifts. From its interlingual features informed by



contrastive or comparative linguistics to situational and effects/impact-oriented dimensions (pragmatic oriented), the notion still falls short of the universally theorised approach to translation. It is therefore important to assess critically the limitations of theoretical approaches that informed the conceptualisation of equivalence to highlight the shortfalls of pedagogical tools, including the over-reliance on dictionaries in translation classrooms.

A reflection on the concept unveils the looseness in nature, definition, scope and applicability of the concept and underlines the implications it may have on teaching translation, especially in A-B language pair classroom experience. The classroom experience of translation can only be improved by helping learners to understanding what seeking equivalence really means in translation. For translation experts, equivalence in meaning transfer should be a dynamic one. According to Nida and Taber (1969, p. 25), “dynamic equivalence in translation is far more than mere correct communication of information”. Culler (1976, pp. 21-22) highlights the complexity of equivalence in translation.

“If language were simply a nomenclature for a set of universal concepts, it would be easy to translate from one language to another. One would simply replace the French name for a concept with the English name [...]. Each language articulates or organizes the world differently. Languages do not simply name existing categories, they articulate their own”.

This rejection of mechanical transfer of meaning in translation would, perhaps, make the operation and its process more demanding, where bilingualism is not enough.

#### *4.3 Conclusion*

To conclude, translation and interpretation competence in professional contexts is one of the great powers of our age, the age of global communication and acculturation. Cronin (2012, p. 5) challenges the ‘messianic’ trends and future of translation:

“Translation, powerfully assisted by the digital toolkit, removes boundaries, abolishes frontiers, and ushers in a brave new world of communicative communion. However, [...] such messianic theories not only misrepresent obdurate political realities, but also fail to account in any adequate way for what translators actually do in the present and have done in the past”.

The question is not whether translation and interpretation will have to be one of the key solutions and activities in multilingual contexts. It is rather the form, mode and shape of the activity in the digital age of a globalised world. This includes thinking about the use of translation and interpretation approaches and methods in preparing linguists and dictionaries. It is also about evaluating critically the impact of the automated text and speech processing tools on human translation and interpreting.

If those who are involved in different forms of translating and interpreting, whether as practitioners or trainers, are aware of the importance of what they are doing in providing effective language skill services, they will also command the vital and irreplaceable role and responsibilities of human translators and interpreters in the communicative encounters of the digital age.

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