

Introduction: Translation and minority, lesser-used and lesser-translated languages and cultures

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, there have been repeated calls by linguists and institutions to recognise and protect languages that are not considered to be 'majority' or 'world' languages. Indigenous, aboriginal, minority, minor, lesser-used: they constitute about 90% of the world's 7000 languages. A growing number of articles and essays have also been devoted to discussing lesser-translated languages. It is interesting to note that although many nation-states throughout the world have some type of bilingual or multilingual language policy in place, these language policies do not always confer equal status to translation policies. Furthermore, they often bypass 'living languages' spoken within national territories. Indeed, in many areas of the world, multilingualism is the norm rather than the exception. Preserving and revitalising those living languages slowly facing extinction has gained high priority status in some sectors, and several projects have materialised to address the shifts that lead to language loss. The struggle to sustain languages in danger often equally implies the need to redress longstanding problems of marginalisation, stigmatisation and misrepresentation. Meanwhile, the globalising digital world and technologies are recontextualising many individual and collective social practices in relation to minority, minor, lesser-used, and endangered language communities. It is clear that translation activities – including audio-visual and multimedia translation, localisation, terminology creation and management, interpreting, etc. – play a significant role in these changing practices. The current issue explores some of these diverse aspects.

KEYWORDS

Translation and minority, lesser-translated languages, translation and multilingualism, translation policies, technologies.

As aptly noted by translation scholar Michael Cronin and Albert Branchadell, the term 'minority' designates "a relation not an essence" (Cronin 1995:86; Branchadell 2011) Over the past decade, there have been repeated calls by linguists and institutions to recognise and protect languages that are not considered to be 'majority' or 'world' languages. Indigenous, aboriginal, minority, minor, lesser-used: they constitute about 90% of the world's 7000 languages, ranking from 5 to 9 on the EGIDS (Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale) scale according to Ethnologue. Of these languages, the status of almost 2500 of them ranges from "threatened" (6b) to "dormant" (9) (see "Ethnologue. Languages of the World"). Despite the ongoing debates surrounding the differentiation of languages from dialects, it is clear that both categories are at risk. Along with publications in linguistics, a growing number of articles and essays have been devoted to discussing lesser-translated languages, for instance the new Translation Studies journal, *mTm* which focuses on the particularities of translation from major into minor languages, and vice versa, as well as translation between minor languages

Those languages spoken and used within the 28 member states that have come to comprise the current European Union, within which 24 are designated “official” and “working” languages are in particular much discussed¹.

Although related concepts like bilingualism and multilingualism are also currently debated by linguists, many nation-states throughout the world have some type of bilingual or multilingual language policy in place. For example, India has 447 living languages², and has implemented a policy whereby Hindi and English are official at the national level, with the decision to choose and legally recognise other languages (currently a total of 21) left to the individual Indian states. In Spain, three autonomous communities have co-official languages (Basque, Catalan, and Galician) in addition to Castilian Spanish. In Africa, South Africa has 11 official languages, while officially bilingual (English, French) Cameroon has 280 living languages, and neighbouring Nigeria 520, of which 3 (Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo) are recognised as national alongside the official English. In the Americas, Brazil has 216 living languages, and Mexico 283, with Spanish the de facto principal language, and 68 indigenous languages recognised as national languages with de jure status under the 2003 Mexican Law of Linguistic Rights. Officially bilingual Canada has a total of 89 living languages, with its Northwest Territories officially recognising 11 (Chipewyan, Cree, English, French, Gwich'in, Inuinnaqtun, Inuktitut, Inuvialuktun, North Slavey, South Slavey, and Tłı̄chǫ), and Nunavut four (Inuktitut, Inuinnaqtun, English, and French) (“Ethnologue”) Papua New Guinea is often cited in literature for its 839 living languages, by last count, and has three designated official languages: Tok Pisin, English, and Hiri Motu.

However, as Translation Studies scholars have pointed out, official language policies do not always confer equal importance on or value to the translation policies that naturally would seem to accompany them; they are not always meticulously implemented or may remain invisible. As noted by Reine Meylaerts (2011), translation policies necessarily underpin language policies, and are critical for carrying out “translational justice,” particularly within the political, institutional framework of nation-states, where they play a key role in regulating access to public life and services and in enabling democratic participatory citizenship. Translation policies, depending on how the terms are defined, officially and unofficially embrace many different scenarios. Some translation policies are mandated locally rather than at the national or federal level of central government. In the U.S. (which has no official language inscribed in law), for example, many states and counties have active translation policies in place for delivering information on public health, social services, immigration, etc. to certain sectors of the population either in their native languages or in versions ‘translated’ for those with Limited English Proficiency (LEP). However, in the context of many of the world’s languages, establishing translation policies potentially entails dealing with such

problematic issues as standardisation of orthography, scripts, grammar, and terminology, as well as literacy and education, all of which may be bound to contentious politics.

In 2002, Suzanne Romaine noted that “the legal approach to reconciling status differences in languages with equality in a world where majority rights are implicit, and minority rights are seen as ‘special’ and in need of justification is fraught with difficulty” (Romaine 2002: 7). Indeed, these rights often imply the need to redress longstanding problems of marginalisation, stigmatisation and misrepresentation that can be entrenched socially and institutionally. Preserving and revitalising languages now threatened by endangerment or extinction has gained high priority status in certain sectors and areas of the world, and translation for some is one way of supporting language survival initiatives. Translation activities are used to create sorely needed aids such as glossaries, dictionaries, and grammar books for language use in the classroom or for research – including in situations where languages or dialects in constant contact with other languages have emerged as pidgins, creoles, or contact languages. Translation enables oral traditions and historical patrimony, as well as literary or cultural works, to be recorded in writing and made available to diverse reading publics. Translation can give global visibility and voice to texts written in restricted, local contexts, and in so doing allow both knowledge to circulate and the values of diverse cultures to engage substantively with more hegemonic ones.

As concisely noted in an editorial piece by Peter K. Austin and Julia Sallabank (2011 and 2013: 313): “The reasons for language endangerment are complex but typically involve a process of language shift as communities abandon their minority heritage languages in favour of larger more economically, politically and socially powerful tongues, most often those spoken by their neighbours and/or supported by local, regional or national governments and economic systems.” Over the course of the past decade, several projects have materialised to address the shifts leading to language loss, endangerment and death, with many including some type of translation component in the process. Some of these projects include: “Documenting Endangered Languages” (DEL); “Enduring Voices;” “World Oral Literature Project;” “Endangered Languages Project;” “Endangered Language Alliance;” and other similar initiatives. UNESCO’s “Endangered Languages Programme” has its roots in conferences and initiatives dating to the 1990s, and its *Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger* is regularly revised³.

If a language is considered to be endangered in any way, the debate on how best to increase its chances for survival encompasses many perspectives, and can probably be generalised most succinctly as a struggle between recording and documenting the language as a means by which to ‘save’ it for posterity

or choosing to proactively set into motion various revitalisation action plans in order to retain a 'living' language status. Many endangered language communities, however, not only lack critical resources, but also struggle with little or no prestige, and with the metaphors and labels associated with their language communities and cultures. Along these lines, Bernard Perley (2012) suggests that a new metaphor such as "emergent vitalities" be used to reflect the proactive stance of language activists conscientiously and creatively promoting language vitality to avert language death by their activities in the community. Furthermore, given the dramatic adoption of Web-based Internet communication by communities worldwide, 'digital language death' has become an additional category for monitoring by linguists and researchers, along with 'physical' language death. As for other digital research, the parameters of analysis include the number of online language communities and digital natives in a given language, as well as the amount of digitally mediated communication that takes place in a language (including videoconference, cellphone, and social media) (Kornai 2013).

Finally, a word on technologies themselves. Comparable to non-endangered, majority and world language communities, the globalising digital world and technologies are recontextualising many individual and collective social practices in relation to minority, minor, lesser-used, and endangered language communities as well. Computers, ICTs, Internet, and constantly evolving Web, networking, and mobile technologies (social media platforms, collaborative and community-based crowdsourced environments, instant communication enabled devices, online learning platforms, microblogging, cloud computing, sharing-enabled knowledge resources, image and video hosted websites, social networking sites, creative media production tools, video streaming sites, video games, open access publishing resources, information and community linking, and distributed virtual teams) now allow for multiple ways of sharing and collaborating among connected users with access to the infrastructure. Translation activities make use of these mainstream technologies, but benefit as well from specialised technologies (subtitling, localisation, translation environment and project management, machine translation and post-editing programs) developed to create and manage translation memory and MT databases, terminology repositories, bilingual and multilingual searchable corpora, and to centralise translation and localisation project management.

It is not surprising to see technologies from the above mainstream and specialised categories being used advantageously by academic, professional, and non-professional individuals and groups to support minority, minor, lesser-used, and endangered languages worldwide. Language processing toolkits for many languages continue to be developed and refined. Other groups network actively online, such as the Resource Network for Language

Diversity (RNLD), an international non-profit organisation seeking “to advance the sustainability of Indigenous languages and to increase the participation of Indigenous peoples in all aspects of language documentation and revitalisation through training, resource sharing, networking, and advocacy.” Video streaming website Viki has partnered with the Living Tongues Institute and implemented crowdsourcing to encourage subtitling of popular TV shows and films in endangered languages. The Indigenous Tweets Project supports the use of indigenous languages on social media, in particular by helping to build online language communities through Twitter (Ethnos Project; Scannel 2012a and 2012b). The “Rising Voices” project, initiated by “globalvoicesonline,” focuses on translating digital citizen media from communities underrepresented online. Both open-source translation tools (see “Open Translation Tools”) and product-projects released by proprietary software developers, such as the Microsoft Translator Hub and Collaborative Translation Framework (CTF) are likewise involved. As Roberta Raine notes in her research on Tibet, the historical development of each language must be considered in context to determine its vitality and status, and translation can be used to strengthen or diminish its position, a task in which technologies currently play an important role (Raine 2010; 2011).

The current issue explores diverse aspects of all of the above. Within the scope of the EU, four articles address translation in the context of ‘minor’ languages, as defined by the translation journal *mTm*, where a ‘minor’ language refers to “either a language of limited diffusion or one of intermediate diffusion compared to a major language or language of unlimited diffusion.” By contrast, ‘major’ language is defined as “a language of unlimited diffusion such as English, or a language that enjoys major status within a state where others, officially recognised minor languages are also spoken” (*mTm*: homepage)

“The automated interlingual mapping effect in trainee subtitlers” by Mikołaj Deckert presents an empirical study on cognitive processing from English into Polish subtitling by subtitlers-in-training. Deckert describes the emergence of a cognitive decision-making pattern of automated interlingual mapping and suggests reasons why the automation may have occurred. Based on the study, and taking into account the incommensurability of language systems at various points, he proposes that translators access a mental inventory of pre-existing pairings of conceptual and linguistic material, and tend to display a high level of conventionalism in their behaviour.

“Integrating technology in Latvian translation education: untranslated medical terminology management practice using online resources and computer-aided translation tools” by Gatis Dilāns presents a student terminology management project focused on medical terminology. In this case, students made use of shared Web sources and CAT (translation environment tools) tools online to

translate Latvian medical terms with no existing official translations in English. Noting that new EU members' multiple terminology sources are often inconsistent and lack coordination in terms of term development and technical compatibility, Dilāns explains how to synthesise tool capabilities and online resources with translation education objectives so that students learn critical research, decision-making, and organisational techniques, and manage issues of concern in terminology, such as harmonisation and standardisation.

"Text-to-speech vs. human voiced audio descriptions: a reception study in films dubbed into Catalan" by Anna Fernández Torné and Anna Matamala presents an empirical, user study to determine whether blind and visually impaired people would accept text-to-speech in the audio description of dubbed feature films in Catalan. Seeking new ways to increase access to culture and entertainment for the blind and visually impaired, Torné and Matamala address a growing mandate to take into account the online accessibility rights of disabled persons. Their results suggest that audio description voiced by humans is preferred by blind and partially sighted persons, and that natural voices scored higher statistically than synthetic ones.

"Minor language, major challenges: the results of a survey into the IT competences of Finnish translators" by Mikhail Mikhailov discusses the challenge and need by communities of less commonly spoken languages to creatively use available resources and technologies. Mikhailov presents the results of a survey conducted among Finnish translators asked to evaluate their needs, skills and training, with particular focus on technologies. With small markets limiting the profitability of developing electronic language resources, corpora, terminology banks, and MT systems (for which the quality of output for minor languages is often poor), translators acquire many of the skills and tools they need on their own.

Outside the scope of the EU, and dealing with national but not world language scenarios, are two articles addressing translation in two very different contexts: software localisation, and political translation. "Evaluating the acceptance and usability of Kiswahili localised mobile phone app in Kenya: a case of M-Pesa app" by Alfred Sanday Wandera highlights some of the specificities of translating and localising a popular software application for mobile devices in Nairobi city and county. Wandera discusses language preferences, terminology challenges, and the problems that partial localisation poses for users, as well as the technical issues that programmers and localisers need to keep in mind for development and design. Underscoring the popularity of mobile technology for communicating information, he suggests not only using Kiswahili as a lingua franca but also devoting resources to helping Africans acquire technologies in their native African languages.

“Lost in political translation: (mis)translation of an intertextual reference and its political consequences – a case of Iran” by Mohammad Saleh Sanatifar discusses the importance of political translation in relation to international relations. Emphasising that misinterpretations and mistranslations can have negative social, ideological or diplomatic consequences among nations, Sanatifar presents a case of mistranslation of a political speech from Farsi into English that sparked controversy and tension with American English media. He stresses that in order to achieve “political equivalence” translators must develop their “political cognition,” understand linguistic-cultural intertextuality and rhetorical styles, and be familiar with the histories, customs, feelings and ideologies of cultures.

The last five articles and interview bring us to different contexts that deal in varying degrees with communities experiencing language and culture loss. “The Canela *m’ypé*: ‘mending ways’ or ‘*modos de reparação*,’ the splendor and misery (need there be?) of presenting new social categories through translation” by Lillian DePaula and Márcio Filgueiras explores a way of conceptualising translation difference through “stereoscopic reading” (Rose 1997: 2) in the context of a collective translation project from English into Brazilian Portuguese of Canela oral traditions compiled by anthropologist William Crocker through his Canela interpreter. Working along the lines of the Canela indigenous concept of *m’ypé* as translation potentiality, DePaula and Filgueiras speak of the “in-between” spaces that express gaps a translation can never entirely fill and which can serve goals of pedagogy and a translation “afterlife.”

“Computerised writing for smaller languages” by Pat Hall focuses on a case study in Nepal, a country which has over 120 languages. Seeking to understand the competing interests and incentives of small linguistic communities wanting and needing to access information and knowledge using their own language, Hall explains the process of dealing with scripts, encoding, and standardisation mechanisms such as Unicode in the particular case of Newari – a language that has been written for over 1000 years in a number of scripts. After describing some of the problems of languages written in script not supported by computers or an imposed script disliked by the linguistic community (Devanagari is seen by some as the writing of historical oppression), he offers recommendations of what can be done for all marginalised languages, especially in terms of choice of language/dialect when resources are limited.

“Towards enhancing digital development in the Canadian North: challenges and opportunities ‘translating’ Inuit voices via new media platforms” by Timothy Pasch proposes a preliminary framework and examples whereby Inuit

knowledge, culture and Inuit *Qaujimaqatuqangit* ('traditional knowledge') can be localised into digital artifacts for new generations of Inuit and non-Inuit learners. While warning against potential postcolonial dangers inherent in digital training, Pasch urges the digital localisation and dissemination of Inuit and circumpolar indigenous voices in order to combat quickly advancing loss of language and culture. Inspired by the Inuit concept of *Qanuqtuurniq* ('innovative and resourceful in seeking solutions'), he advocates enhancing the Arctic digital cyberinfrastructure and training Northern youth and Elders so that digital production in Inuktitut by Inuit for Inuit will be meaningful for a new generation accustomed to acquiring knowledge digitally.

"Decolonial translation in Daniel Caño's *Stxaj no' anima / Oración Salvaje*" by Amy Olen critically analyzes a "decolonising strategy" used by Guatemalan Maya-Q'anjob'al poet Daniel Caño, as he grapples with the legacy of Catholic epistemological imposition on and attempted erasure of Maya spirituality in Guatemala through assimilative practices such as translation. As Olen demonstrates, through the decolonial translation of spiritual coloniality, Caño asserts a Maya spiritual belief system rooted in the interconnectedness of humans and nature, and manifest in written texts, oral tradition and the body. Through her analysis, she shows that Caño's dual-language Maya-Q'anjob'al/Castilian text functions as a 'back translation' that asserts a Maya episteme over the Christian translation colonising legacy of assimilation.

The last article by Nadja Weisshaupt brings us beyond human language. In "Localisation of bird sounds in the German and English versions of Lars Svensson's Swedish ornithological field guide *Fågelguiden*," the question of interspecies communication is brought to the fore. This article enters unexplored territory, attempting to consider the translation of bird vocalisation by applying localisation criteria.

Our interview with Julie Brittain and Marguerite MacKenzie highlights some of the insights gained through their experience and research with the Aboriginal Cree, Naskapi and Innu language communities of Canada. Reflecting on matters of identity, language, culture, oral tradition and storytelling, Brittain and MacKenzie discuss the roles translation and terminology play in the context of these language-endangered communities attempting to meet the challenges of everyday contemporary life and researchers supporting these communities by transcribing oral traditions, recording and translating stories in performance settings, and creating dictionaries, grammars, glossaries, as well as training materials for legal and medical interpreting.

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Biography

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¹ The 24 EU official and working languages are Bulgarian, Croatian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, Estonian, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Hungarian, Irish, Italian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Maltese, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Slovak, Slovenian, Spanish, Swedish, with some languages like Catalan and Welsh having 'co-official' status (European Commission: Linguistic Diversity).

² All statistics included in this introduction are from the "Ethnologue" site.

³ UNESCO also introduced "International Mother Language Day" in November 1999 (30C/62), and in 2007 the UN General Assembly in its resolution A/RES/61/266 called upon Member States "to promote the preservation and protection of all languages used by peoples of the world" (see Moseley 2007).