



The old Main Gate of Tsinghua University, Beijing

This article was published in *Language International* 14, # 5. 40-43.

TRANSLATION IN THE GLOBAL AGE

Cay Dollerup, Copenhagen, Denmark

This is an edited version of Cay Dollerup's plenary address at Tsinghua University, Beijing, in June 2002 at the first Lingnan-Tsinghua Symposium, organised by Professor Luo Xuanmin of Tsinghua University.

Introduction

Translation has, if anything, always been international, but I shall here try to pinpoint a few features in which translation and the present-day 'globalisation' have worked hand in hand: for, at least among language professionals, there can be no doubt that globalisation is in a large measure due to and dependent on translation rather than the knowledge of English. I shall address mostly the remarkable changes that have occurred in practical translation, and the interplay between theory and practice with special emphasis on the seachanges since 1990. However, in order to put these in perspective, it is also pertinent to have a brief – and simplified - view of previous states of and developments in the field of translation

Before the 20th century

There were few types of translation in the sense of a transfer of linguistic messages from one language to another before the 20th century. One was interpreting which must have existed ever since the first contacts between humans speaking different language. In the main it must have been limited to **consecutive interpreting**. There may have been ‘**whispered interpreting**’.

Translation (written to written) presupposes the existence of two written languages and is therefore unlikely to be more than 10,000 years old. International trade, political treaties, religious writing (Buddhism and Christianity) have all been propagated in a permanent form in translation.

The 20th century

The first half of the of the 20th century saw the introduction of movies with **inter-texts** and the talkies with **synchronisation** (dubbing) and **subtitling**, as well as the beginning of **simultaneous interpreting** by means of microphones and earphones. These types have all branched out into regional as well as medium-bound types. Since then yet other types such as opera and theatre (**sur**)**titling** have been added and there doubtlessly other types that I do not know of.

The features that I shall discuss, are not ‘new’, but they have come to the fore now.

Institutionalised translation

There has been reasonably ‘institutionalised’ translation activity before. The Chinese translation of the Buddhist sutras and the Arabic centres of translation in Baghdad and Toledo come to mind. The first multilingual political and social meeting in Europe seems to have been the so-called ‘Congress of Vienna’ (1814-1815) where more than 200 European rulers or their delegates met in the capital of Austria to determine European borderlines after the Napoleonic Wars. There were repeat performances in the course of and after World War 1 (in the Treaty of Versailles) and at war tribunals after World War 2.

Today, there are many international organisations that have several official languages: the United Nations uses English for internal work but issues political statements simultaneously in its six official languages: Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish. The language work is done by a permanent staff of c 450 translators and 150 interpreters in addition to free-lancers. The largest professional staff of translators is found at the European Union institutions. They tie together fifteen European countries by means of translation from and into the eleven official languages. These institutions have a staff of nearly 1,000 interpreters and 3,000 translators and terminologists.

Minority languages

At the same time there has also, both nationally and internationally, been growing awareness of minorities' right to have their own language within major nations. China has a long and respectable history of accepting the languages of minorities. But some European nation states created in the 19th and 20th centuries have had difficulties in accepting minority languages: many have accepted the minority languages of some of their regions only within the last thirty years. However, the recognition of minority languages is an ongoing process – it has not and will not happen overnight. It is related to simple things such as the general welfare of a society: only societies that are no longer involved in bitter fights for survival can allow themselves the luxury of tolerance.

Minor and major languages

It is even more interesting that the division between major and minor languages is getting blurred: when six European nations laid the foundation stones for the European Union in 1957, Italian and Dutch both became 'official languages', but most negotiations and daily work was conducted only in German and French. When Denmark (5.2 million inhabitants) and the UK entered in 1973, the Danes demanded 'equal rights' – and eventually got some concessions. At that stage Denmark itself had barely accepted that its own linguistic minorities in the North Atlantic, the Faeroe Islands (44,000 inhabitants) and Greenland (56,000 inhabitants) should have near-autonomous status and their own parliaments for local affairs.

The world domination of English as 'lingua franca' should also be taken with a large grain of salt: far from all people who claim to speak 'English' are understandable to most other speakers of English, native as well as non-native. We are seeing a segmentation of 'English'. I predict that there will be a 'world English of top speakers and teachers of Received Standard English' or, in the US, a 'world American'. There are further national varieties in Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa, all of which have an identity of their own. Then there are countries in which English is used for business purposes between people of the same 'nationality': Nigeria comprises more than 100 indigenous languages. South Africa has eleven official languages and, in addition, numerous 'heritage languages'.

Experts in various fields communicate internationally at conferences, in journals, and on the Internet in some variety of English which is often opaque to outsiders but which has become the acknowledged standard in their respective fields: the essential message is encoded in equations, drawings, sketches and the like, rather than idiomatic and syntactically correct 'English'.

We will therefore not be faced with one 'world-English' but with a very large number of 'regional Englishes' as second languages as well as social and educational segmentations of these types of English. Experts will use types of English that differ from

those of tourists, and so on. In other contexts, most obviously international politics, industry, and business, politicians and executives will have to depend on the services of linguistic middlemen whose foreign language and cultural competence is tops: There will be an explosion in the number of translators, interpreters, subtitlers, surtitlers and the like in the globalised world of tomorrow.

The national languages and even minority languages will not be replaced by a world English in the foreseeable future. Minority and small languages are hitting back: whereas English was the dominant language on the Internet in terms of web sites and the like when it was started in the beginning of the 1990s, the latest figures show that it is now down to 40% of the number of accessible home pages - and the number of 'English only' home pages is declining rapidly as the number of pages in other languages is increasing.



Simultaneous interpreting

The last decade of the 20th century

The most momentous and sudden changes in the world of translation and interpreting took place in the last decade of the 20th century.

The 'machine translation systems' came of age, and developed in ways that could be put to practical use around 1990.

The large-scale use of computers (and the complementary electronic tools including translation memories) by all the 3,000 translators and some of the nearly 1,000 interpreters at the European Union institutions meant that enormous corpora of translations became available to language professionals at the EU institutions.

Machine translation took to the Internet a mere four years ago.

And this, in turn, makes simultaneity of the questionable 'original' and 'translation' much more of reality than ever before.

The changes are daunting.

Teamwork

These changes can probably best be described by two or three key terms: **simultaneity**, **recycling** and **teamwork**. The latter two were unquestioned parts of the Chinese way of life until the advent of Western traders. They were rarely key words in the Western world in its development in the last five hundred years. There is now a dawning com-

prehension, notably in politics and education that groups of people may share loyalties and can work together as equals, recognising differences in ability, competence, and knowledge. It has been particularly slow to seep down in professional translation circles in the West where - until twenty years ago – one would meet translators who jealously guarded and treasured their specialist vocabularies, although some agencies have practiced teamwork for half a century or more. The United Nations as well as the European Union both of which have come into existence after 1945, have, ever since their inception recycled translations in so far as new rules and legislation would have to follow the precise wording of previous translations concerning the same field. Until the large-scale introduction of computers, the mere identification of such previous translation was a time-consuming process demanding use of dictionaries, terminology lists, and complex indexing systems. Now the translators in these organisations can, immediately, store all documentation needed for an assignment on their computers and, if needed, access the whole store of the organisation's previous translations of legally binding agreements. The computer will tell the translator right away whether a sentence has been translated before and in which form: if legally binding, the phrasing of the first finalised directive cannot be changed. However, if it is an *ad hoc* translation, the translator can re-use previous suggestions or – perhaps – be inspired to write something new and more adequate. There are numerous systems on the market, with TRADOS, SYSTRAN and 'déjà-vu' dominating in Europe. The European Union institutions now have their own advanced version of SYSTRAN which is used for 'translating' more than 500,000 pages a year for non-linguistic staff. The system is strictly for internal use, the products must never be released to others than the user in question, and it is not accessible to the public. The main strength is that it is near-instantaneous and serves to give a staff member an overview of the general contents of a document. The translation may be post-edited (that is, 'edited for better readability') if the staff member using the system requests this.

Small translation agencies usually specialise in one or two fields which means that there will often be previous translations concerning the subject matter. When they introduce translation memory systems (TMs) these function well for translation work. The last time I looked into it, it took a firm with four employees about six months before the investment began to pay off. Now they will have their databanks transferred from one computer to newer models, thus accumulating the amount of previous translation readily at hand, and will consequently have increased the number of pages they translate per day. If they boost the process by scanning previous source texts and translations optically, they will increase output even more.

Internet translation

The principles of Internet translation are, to some extent, the same as those mentioned above. Small surprise, for the machine translation system available free of charge

is, usually, an earlier version of SYSTRAN than the one for sale on the commercial market. There are other translation systems, depending on the search engines one uses. The procedure is extremely simple. One accesses a search engine, such as www.google.com, asks for some information in Spanish, French, or English, copies it, and then returns to the start page of the search engine. Here one clicks on the 'Translate' option, dumps the material and receives a 'translation' in English, Spanish, or French.

It will have been noted that I focus on three languages only, although the Internet system prides itself on having numerous language combinations. However, the only combinations which work well enough to give a general idea of the potential of Internet translation are English, French, and Spanish. In the case of English, this is clearly because so much has been translated into and from it. French is strong because it was previously used in international treaties – and more importantly – because all documents in Canada must be written in both Canadian-English and Quebecois-French, the latter having much in common with written French. The reason why Spanish is strong is partly due to the translation activity between South and North America, but also because Spanish translators are best at providing the machine systems with feedback leading to improvements.

In order to provide my readers with a general impression of the potential relevance of Internet translation, I can give a real-life example: I pick an article on the front page in the national Spanish newspaper 'El mundo':

Durante un discurso con motivo del 14 aniversario del final de la guerra con Irán, el presidente iraquí, Sadam Husein, ha advertido que su país "derrotará" a Estados Unidos si finalmente decide atacar Irak. (EFE)

I ask for a translation from Spanish into English. Within seconds I get the following rendition:

During a speech in the occasion of the 14 anniversary of the end of the war with Iran, the Iraqi president, Sadam Husein, has noticed that its country "defeated" to the United States if finally it decides to attack Iraq. (EFE)

This translation does give us a fairly accurate picture of what the article is about. It is thought-provoking that Internet translation has been available only since 1998/99.

And we can easily rephrase the above translation into something readable: "During a speech on the occasion of the 14th anniversary of the end of the war with Iran, the president of Iraq, Sadam Hosein, publicly said that his country would "defeat" the United States if it eventually decides to attack Iraq."

At the time of writing (August 2002), it is estimated that at least 6 million pages are 'translated' in this way on the Internet every day (info: Geoffrey Kingscott). Just think of what will happen when Internet translation is just as adequate between English and Chinese or other language combinations.

Predictions

A Danish humorist, Mr Robert Storm Petersen, said nearly a hundred years ago that “It’s hard to make predictions, especially about the future.” Nevertheless, I dare predict that in the future, the world will need more translators. Their work will become increasingly specialised and with a steady shift towards more intelligent control of the work done by previous translators as well as machines and technological tools.

It is a guess on my part that, since the power of the computer hardware is doubled every 18 months, we shall in the near future see programmes that can search a million bilingual home pages in a matter of seconds and suggest different translations which are equally adequate in different situations for the same source-language segment.

The pained original and simultaneity

The last decade finally saw a flood in what had hitherto been only a drizzle of blurred lines about the boundaries between translation and the sacrosanct and unquestioned original. Industrial products are marketed simultaneously with localised manuals and instructions. Books appear simultaneously or near-simultaneously, often with the same illustrations. Films – such as *The Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars II* were released on the same day in numerous countries. The EU is issuing regulations and directives which – despite the fact that they are the outcome of much translation – have, at best, only a doubtful linguistic original and in political terms, none at all. The Internet serves with its instant translations to show how precarious the hold of the original is on convincingly being ‘first’. With a touch of a button, we can switch between international news channels and get the same statesman delivering the same speech, directly, interpreted, and subtitled in different languages. And then repeated all over one hour later.

Translation practice and translation theory

A couple of years ago, I published *Tales and Translation*, a historical study of translations of the German Grimm ‘Tales’ into Danish over a period of 170 years. Reviewers have noted that it abundantly illustrates many otherwise neglected factors which influence a translation and “overflow the single thematic units encountered in translation theory” (Dinda Gorlée. *Perspectives* 2000: 68). The study documents that many of the above-mentioned ‘new’ phenomena have existed before: the original has not been stable, equally valid translations have co-existed, recycling has been used, there has been near-simultaneity, and publication has been internationally synchronised, etc.

Rather than looking at the lessons of the past, however, today’s professionals, teachers and scholars in the field of translation should pay careful attention to what is happening in translation practice.

We have to rethink traditional approaches to translation and translational products.



The United Nations Building, New York