

Translating the Symbolic Olympics in Barcelona

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Almost everyone thinks translation is a good thing. Some translations are no doubt better than others, but the very existence of translation, the attempt to translate, is thought to be universally beneficial. It enables communication, transcultural understanding, perhaps even peace, surely in everyone's best interests. Consider, however, the very specific interests recently described by Dominique Colas:

"The nation-state prefers translation to linguistic pluralism. Translation maintains the nation-state's principle of superposing cultural and political frontiers, whereas linguistic pluralism undoes that principle by affirming multiple cultural loyalties." (1992: 101)

Colas is careful to diversify the argument. But the fact remains that nation-states are interested enough to invest money in translation, subsidizing translators and developing national translation policies. National education systems increasingly train professional translators and interpreters, codifying a small fraction of the population as qualified intermediaries so that the rest might remain relatively untroubled by multiple loyalties. Translation is eminently useful for a world divided into nations. By its very nature, it draws lines between languages and maintains distances between cultures. If I need to gain information about the other through a translation, the first information I gain is that the other's language and culture are not mine. They are foreign; they can be known as foreign. If translation is always a good thing, linearly separated languages and cultures might also always be good things. I and some Bosnians have doubts about this. There is room for debate.

The relations between translation and nationalism can be studied on many levels. One might look at the way collections of translations often identify and separate national literatures. Traditional translation analysis, in comparing source and target, could be seen as a way of maintaining the distinction between two sides of a border. Theories of untranslatability and culture-specific translation norms might be read as implicit reinforcements of that border. More directly, however, one can analyze the role played by translation policies within national and inter-national institutions.

The most challenging cases for such policy analysis are those where the interests of

individual nation-states are most problematic. The modern Olympic games are one such institution. Founded at the end of the last century, their noble function is to enable competition between athletes from all nations. Their more pragmatic function is to make sure the world is divided into nations, attaching powerful emotive values to the symbols of this separation.

My concern here is with the role played by translation and language policy at the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games, including the four-year period - the olympiad - that preceded the actual events. Most of my information comes from the official report (COOB'92: 1992), spiced with a little of my own experience as a freelance translator working for the games.

The Barcelona Olympics had to deal with nationalism on two main levels. The first was the microcosm of Barcelona as a bilingual city. Barcelona is the second city of Spain, but it is also the capital of Catalonia, a stateless nation with about six million people and an official language, Catalan. The second level was then the macrocosm of the games as a truly global event, with participants from almost all nations and television viewers in almost all nations.

It would be wrong to say that translation connected these two levels. Language policy was only important for the microcosm. Television, iconic communication, created the macrocosm. I shall thus consider the general relation between these two levels and then analyze them separately. My hypothesis, however, is that the problems presented by Catalan on the small-scale lingual level were essentially the same as those ensuing from the globalizing power of television. The microcosm and the macrocosm both presented fundamental questions about the definition and relative powers of nations.

On both these levels, and indeed in any policy analysis, work must begin from the fundamental distinction between what was supposed to happen in theory and what actually happened in practice.

So let us see how the microcosm and the macrocosm were supposed to be stuck together.

A General Relation: the Global Village

McLuhan's notion of the global village projects the ability of the media to make large-scale social structures seem very small. Whatever its initial idealism, the concept finds a very material correlative in the Olympic games.

The games themselves manipulate a symbolism of small-scale social structures. Concepts like the "Olympic village" and, at Barcelona, "the Olympic family" suggest that competition occurs with Freudian intimacy. The events are similarly small-scale. Even major spectacles like the opening and closing ceremonies can only really be attended by official guests, athletes' families, and a merely representative "general public." At Barcelona these ceremonies were held in the rather small Montjuïc stadium. The much larger venue offered by the Barcelona football club was refused. But size was virtually irrelevant. The Montjuïc stadium was of extreme symbolic value. Originally built in the pre-Franco era, it represented

the Olympics that Barcelona would have had if the Spanish Civil War hadn't got in the way, or so the story goes. It thus symbolized contact with traditions of the Catalan language and culture, which had been repressed throughout the Franco regime. Symbols were more important than size. After all, the stadium was little more than a rather elaborate television studio.

The events and ceremonies found their target public through television. According to the official report, some 3,500 million people saw televised coverage of some part of the Barcelona Olympics. This is about three quarters of the world population. Through television, Olympic villages, families, and symbolic stadiums did indeed create a global village, the symbols of which were selected and witnessed in the intimacy of family homes.

But what viewers saw was not necessarily what happened in Barcelona. How many people knew - or cared - that these games had four official languages?

The Microcosm: Translation

The official languages of the International Olympic Committee are English and French. All official documents have to be published in these two languages. According to the Olympic Charter of 1987, the documents of each olympiad must also be available in the language of the "host country." But it is naïve to assume that each country has just one language. Similarly naïve is any assumption of monolingualism in individual cities, and the olympiads are in fact conceded to host cities rather than countries. Strict application of the Charter could have meant deciding whether Barcelona belonged to Catalonia or Spain. It could have meant defining a "country" as a people, a nationality, or a nation-state. In practice the language problem was resolved by adopting both Catalan and Castilian (Spanish) as official languages for the Barcelona olympiad, in addition to the obligatory English and French. Translation was used to ensure that all official documents were available in all four languages.

An important political problem nevertheless remained on the level of determining the host "country." If Catalan could be an official language, why shouldn't there be an official Catalan team, with its own national committee? The Catalan term "nació," like most of its Romance-language counterparts, does not necessarily imply a nation-state. A stateless nation can still be a "nació," perhaps understandable as a "nationality" in English (Pym 1991). In Catalonia, such willful understanding supported repeated calls for official recognition of the "Catalan Olympic Committee." The calls were repeatedly denied by the International Olympic Committee. So when the Charter says "host country," it apparently means "nation," and more specifically "nation-state." Language policy was one thing; the principle of a world divided into nation-states was quite another. Catalonia could have official documents translated into and from Catalan, but it could not have a Catalan team. Or were its real representatives the team of translators?

The Organizing Committee of the Barcelona olympiad created its Department of Language Services in January 1988. In the period to July 10th 1992 this department was responsible for the translation of some 61.5 million words, to which must be added the 2.5 million words translated during the games themselves (through to August 10th 1992). It was not an inconsiderable undertaking. But the work was not always as equitable as the original policy might suggest. The role of Catalan varied in the course of the olympiad.

The formation and function of the Olympic translation teams can be analyzed in terms of four overlapping stages, perhaps like a long relay race.

The first stage of preparatory work was marked by close collaboration with the translation school (EUTI) at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, where I happened to teach at the time. Many of the documents for the original candidature and initial planning were carried out by teachers of translation. Two teachers also collaborated with the Catalan government's Department of Language Services to draw up a multilingual terminology bank of some 2,000 terms. By the beginning of the games this work had become a series of 29 glossaries comprising a total of 14,306 terms, each with their definition . . . in Catalan.

The political choice of Catalan as the defining language should not be surprising. Entire registers had to be created or standardized in this language. Not only had no sporting event of similar dimensions ever been organized in Catalan, but the language's written transmission had been interrupted by the Franco dictatorship. The initial translation work was thus not merely to transfer meanings into Catalan, but also to form new areas of Catalan corresponding to concepts and phenomena that the language had not previously been expressed with precision. Translation can create official languages.

Institutional collaboration between the university translation school and the Catalan government (henceforth the "Generalitat") should be similarly unsurprising. The Autonomous University of Barcelona is responsible to the Generalitat, making it part of the Catalan "national" education system (my paychecks were in Catalan). The translation school is thus organized around two "A languages" (mother tongues), Catalan and Castilian. It also offers special courses in things like legal translation into Catalan, directly connected with the language demands of the Catalan governmental structures. We thus find an education system that is closely allied with national purposes, albeit in the absence of a full-fledged Catalan nation-state.

The Generalitat itself has a very elaborate and expensive policy for the promotion and standardization of Catalan, surreptitiously combatting the language's regional dialects and variants. It subsidizes extratranslations and intratranslations in all media and generously picks up the tab for Barcelona's two Catalan-speaking television channels. The government's participation in the Olympic terminology project was just one extension of its general promotion of Catalan.

Although the terminology work continued throughout the olympiad, the use of institutional translators soon gave way to an in-house structure. In view of the rapid increase

in the number of texts to be translated, the Organizing Committee created its own Department of Language Services. Immediately prior to the games, the department comprised its Catalan director, three full-time translators working into Catalan, three into English, three into French, and only two into Castilian. Most of these translators were recruited from Barcelona's extensive intercultural communities, ensuring relative mother-tongue competence in the target languages. The teams nevertheless collaborated with about 100 external translators, some of whom were very external indeed. Even when about three thousand kilometers away in the Canary Islands, my wife and I were receiving and sending translations by modem.

Most of the texts I worked from during this second stage were in Castilian or a mixture of Castilian and Catalan. This would explain why the in-house team had only two translators working into Castilian: whatever the initial focus on Catalan, the actual source-language was increasingly Castilian. The practical reason for this limited use of Catalan is that, thanks to the language's interrupted transmission, only a restricted group of professionals can really write it in accordance with the new standardization. Recourse to Castilian was often unavoidable.

There was thus a good deal of idealism involved in the initial preparatory work in Catalan. In fact, the terminological problems actually encountered by the translators were often not addressed in the Catalan glossaries, and the in-house norms (use of capitals, standardized names, etc.) were changed several times. In a situation where new problems were constantly arising, it was impossible to pretend that the terminologists had systematically preceded the translators. The translators themselves were often in the lead, forced to make terminological decisions and then wait to see if the revisers would standardize or reject their solutions.

For all these reasons, the priority given to Catalan in the first stage was only partly followed through in the second stage.

The third stage was then the translating carried out during the games themselves. The standard source language was by now Castilian. For the written side of the work, the in-house Department of Language Services employed 27 professional translators and revisors, plus 50 translation students recruited through the ERASMUS program in conjunction with the university translation school. The work was into English, French and Catalan, but obviously not into Castilian.

The students translating at the Central Press Service worked into English and French and had their work revised by professionals. But no students were employed for written work into Catalan, since only professionals can write correct Catalan. This asymmetry in the translation teams was clearly contradicted by the rough equality of the workload. Much of the translating was for the computerized information service (AMIC, a Catalan acronym meaning "friend"), for which all information had to be in all four official languages. This meant that the official work was about the same for the teams working into English, French and Catalan. But the practical priorities at the Central Press Service meant there were more

professionals working into English than into French, more into French than into Catalan, and no students to help the Catalans, who were always the last to go home.

Despite their official equality, the languages were by no means equal with respect to demand. This is fairly easily explained. English had priority because it served a huge number of journalists from many countries; French was of less priority because the many French journalists in Barcelona were able to collect their own information; and Catalan had least priority because Catalan journalists could read the Castilian texts without waiting for the translations. The highly unequal nature of the actual language demands thus revealed the very symbolic nature of the initial language policy. All the official languages were equal, but some had more translators and greater marked demands.

The work during the games also included a significant amount of simultaneous interpreting. A total of 176 professional interpreters were employed for work at 338 meetings. Unlike the written translators, the employment of interpreters had relatively little to do with the local complications of language policy: 95 of them came from outside Spain, 19 from other parts of Spain, and only 62 from Catalonia. Whereas the written translators were subject to the politics of symbolic needs and terminological elaboration, the interpreters were supposed to follow the standards already set. In practice, their work was mostly left to professional criteria, with only occasional interference from Catalan as a source language. Well paid and necessarily short-term, interpreting comes and goes, leaving few traces, creating few political problems.

As a fourth stage, some note should be made of the way the Olympic games have influenced the translation market in Barcelona. Many of the translators employed by the in-house Department of Language Services have since set up a small network of independent translation agencies. One works into English, another into French, and a third into Catalan. In the case of the team working into English, the agency was actually established about a year before the games, taking most of the Olympic work with it. These moves have enabled the translators to structure reasonably long-term employment for themselves. They thus maintain some of the work relationships developed during the olympiad, including such standards as terminological and syntactic conventions, a general preference for Apple computers, and professional competence in translation to or from Catalan. But the translators have formed explicitly separate companies. The institutional collaboration between theoretical equals has given way to commercial recognition that the demand for translation is by no means the same for all languages.

The main point to be extracted from this four-stage model is the progressive reduction in the role of Catalan. As the initial institutional involvement gave way to the priorities of increasing workloads and direct demands, the symbolic equality of the four official languages was changed into a very asymmetric distribution of translators. In keeping with this process, the selection of the translators themselves appears to have moved progressively away from the local institutional structure of the Catalan government and education system,

finally conforming to explicitly market-based criteria.

There was no absolute contradiction between what was supposed to happen and what actually happened. Few could doubt that the Catalan language benefited from the Olympic games. But the above process shows that the symbolic purposes served by the initial translation policy slowly had to give way to language-specific demands. A stateless nation could not really compete with multinational languages.

The Macrocasm: Television

The principle of a world of symbolically equal nations of course presented numerous political problems on the wider level. The International Olympic Committee had to decide who or what could be a national team. There was a united German team, corresponding to a united state. Former Yugoslavia became a series of national teams, regardless of the disputed principles underlying their new states. But the lack of a state did not stop the ex-Soviet Union from parading as a "united team." And although a South African team was present, it was denied the national symbols of anthems, colours and flags. A world in transition challenged the nationalist principle underlying the Olympics. The official use of Catalan was only one of a series of compromises designed to save that principle and play happy families.

Despite such compromises, the games nevertheless gave the nation-state principle some of its most powerful iconic apotheoses. The truly emotional moment in any Olympic event must be when the winner receives their gold medal, stands on a podium, watches their national flag being hoisted, listens to their national anthem, and, if you're lucky, sheds a tear or two. Years of individual effort culminate in a triumph firmly welded to national icons. The athlete has won for their "country." There is no language. This superb television moment works with inexplicable force, even if the viewer is not from the country concerned, even if one doesn't particularly like that country. The global success of the televised Olympics says much about the power of twentieth-century nationalism.

For both commercial and ideological reasons, the Olympic games cannot remain indifferent to the power underlying its most successful moments. The organizers must collaborate and deal with television. As with the language policy, this involves a certain conflict between official equality and market demands.

The Organizing Committee had its own radio and television service responsible for supplying live coverage to the various national and European networks. This official coverage was supposed to be objective and neutral, without any special focus on particular events or athletes. In theory, it offered the same equality of access as the language policy. The equality might have seemed even more neutral, since iconic information can pretend to avoid to the processes of selection, compartmentalization and standardization needed for wholly linguistic information. Where written language was necessary - for the on-screen display of world and Olympic records -, it was reduced to its most symbolic level, albeit in

specifically Latin script. In the relative absence of individual languages, one is supposed to see the event as it is, without undue hindrance from a minor international code.

This is of course an illusion. Television images are selected, framed and strung together with a syntax that is by no means objective. Yet a critical analysis of these official images would be rather pointless. The actual television coverage was dominated by the various national and European networks that had numerous mobile units working at the games: NBC, RTVE, CCRTV, BBC, RAI, FR3, ARD, ZDF, SVT and so on. The most important of these was NBC. Since the American network was essential for the financial success of the whole show - the income of the Olympic games comes almost entirely from the sale of television rights -, no one was going to tell it to adopt a neutral international coverage. NBC alone refused the on-screen script for world and Olympic records, producing its own script for the United States. But the other networks were no less nationalist in providing their own coverage and then mixing it, where appropriate or unavoidable, with the official images.

Selection was necessary, since events were occurring simultaneously. The games were materially more than any one television signal could depict. Of course, some networks could select more directly than others. The richer the network, the more mobile units it had and the more its own live images could be tailored to the perceived interests of its national audience. Further selection and mixing then occurred through specific focus on events in which the various national teams were participating or were likely to do well. And then even more selection determined which images received prime-time retransmission or extensive news commentary. No matter how neutral the original official coverage, each country finished up seeing its own Olympics.

Witnessing much of the games on Spanish television, I thought Spain had won just about everything. The commentators started counting how many medals each country had won, giving the total for gold, silver and bronze. But when Spain won almost exclusively gold medals, the tally system recorded only gold, to make sure Spain was higher in the tables. There was some minor embarrassment when a young Spaniard living in the United States won a backstroke event and, when interviewed, could hardly speak Castilian. But this return of the language problem - a trace of sport as a technology with its international centers and international languages - did little to dampen the jubilation. If you win, you're Spanish, no matter what your language. As an Australian at the Olympics I looked in vain for mention of my corresponding soccer team; it did remarkably well, but only an Australian would know. Then, in the weeks following the games, I talked with Israelis who could not understand why I hadn't been impressed with how well they had done in judo; the French were similarly proud for reasons I still fail to grasp; Brazilians couldn't believe I didn't know who had won the men's volleyball, and so on. We all saw what television allowed us to see.

And the Catalans? Having gained official recognition of their language but not of their team, they were not to be outdone. Their two television channels repeated day after day the image of their young athlete who, having won the walking event, ran around the stadium

carrying the Catalan flag. The image was still there a year later when Barcelona celebrated the first "anniversary" of the games. For Barcelona, the walker carrying the flag has become a symbol of the entire olympiad. We all thought our countries had won something of importance. Even Catalonia, stateless but with the power of national television, is sure it also won.

The richer the country, the more resources its television network was able to invest in selecting and promoting its own Olympics. Television was thus able to appropriate or avoid officially neutral international coverage, using the games for very nationalist purposes.

The Symbolic Olympics

The history of the Olympic games reads like a periodical litmus test of twentieth-century nationalism. From initial indifference to the politicization of sport at Hitler's Berlin and through to the political boycotts of Moscow and Los Angeles, the games record the general divisions of the world. As an eight-year-old boy with nothing better to do, I memorized the flags of all the nations participating in the 1964 Tokyo Olympics. As a much bigger boy I stared for a long time at the flags of all the nations participating at Barcelona. Could I have forgotten so many? No, my memory was good. The world had changed. There were simply many more flags, more than at any previous games.

The number of nations in the world has increased vertiginously in recent years. By the end of the century we might expect the United Nations to have about 200 member states. This prospect presents serious communication and negotiation problems. Can so many political entities really understand each other and reach agreements? The inevitable solution is to restrict official communication to one or several languages, thereby undemocratically restricting the number of professionals who can enter into negotiations. Television may then be left to create its politically necessary illusions of a global village.

This is done at the United Nations. It is also done to a certain extent in the European Community, although the next enlargement of the EC will require a more serious restriction of official languages. Careful attention will have to be given to Coulmas's argument that "the EC 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" (1990: 8). A properly European policy will have to be formulated. The real question, though, is how many official languages. For exactly what purposes? And for how long?

As a four-year race, the olympiad is a fixed-term project, unlike the UN or the EU. It is well suited to translation as a general policy. If the institutional time frame were much wider, translation could work to the detriment of more economical strategies like language-learning or the development of a *lingua franca*. But even within its limited frame, the Barcelona Olympics suggest that politically correct equality, formulated for symbolic nationalist purposes, tends to give way to the priorities of multinational languages. Translation can

service both symbolic and market demands. But its repeated use in long-term institutions will require that a real price be put on its symbolic uses. And the price may well be greater than what individual nations, with or without states, are able to pay.

Translation may not always be a good thing.

Note

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