

## **Localization and the Training of Linguistic Mediators for the Third Millennium**

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Intercultural Studies Group  
Universitat Rovira i Virgili  
Tarragona, Spain

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**L**inguistic mediation, I suggest, is only worthwhile if it can promote long-term cooperation between cultures. I would like briefly to unpack this very loaded proposition. I will then attempt to analyze the specificity of localization as a form of linguistic mediation.

First, the notion of linguistic mediation should cover everything that can happen when languages are in contact and there is some impulse for communication across their boundaries. When we learn the language of the other, that is a form of mediation. So is recourse to a pidgin, or to a lingua franca such as international English. Mediation might also involve a conversation in several languages, as in the use of passive knowledge of the other’s tongue, or the various forms of code-switching. Translation and interpreting, of course, are just further forms of mediation, undoubtedly the most laborious, justifiably the most expensive. Localization, we will later argue, is a composite form of mediation, performing the same tasks in rather specific ways.

Most societies invest resources in all these forms of mediation. Everyone will learn languages to some degree or another, one sector will go on to use languages for professional mediation, then a few will work as translators and interpreters. But all forms of mediation have their role to play. We should not make language learning a fetish (“everyone must learn perfect English”) any more than we should see translation as a heroic solution, somehow akin to scaling high mountains. The key to relations between these forms of mediation is in fact rather simple: for short-term one-off relations, it is worthwhile using translators and interpreters; for long-term relations, it makes sense to learn foreign languages very well; and in between these extremes, it is cost-effective to play with passive competencies, code-switching and pidgins of various kinds.

Lesson one: If you are going to translate or interpret, make sure your services are expensive. You thus make it cost-effective for your society to invest adequate resources in teaching languages to wide sectors (rather than constantly depend on translation alone). You should also logically adjust your services to those situations where it is cost-effective to translate or interpret.

Lesson two: If you are going to train translators or interpreters, accept that most trainees will spend most of their professional life engaged in other modes of mediation. They will be teaching languages, or providing representation services in foreign languages, or otherwise revising, documenting, programming, localizing, or simply switching languages in order to buy in one place and sell in another. The various surveys of the long-term employment of students generally concur in this: no more than about a third of translation graduates actually work for any length of time in translation or interpreting. The rest move on to alternative means of mediation.

Lesson three: A society's choices are rarely between one form of mediation or another. Investment more normally occurs in several forms at the same time, without contradiction or conflict. For example, UNESCO numbers show that the higher a country's percentage of translated books, the higher the percentage of foreign-language books published in the same country. That is, the more a society translates, the more it also uses foreign languages internally. By the same logic, a society that sets out to train more translators than it strictly needs (and this is generally the case) is thereby investing in a range of alternative means of mediation.

These are all reasons why we should be studying and analyzing linguistic mediation rather than a restrictively narrow notion of translation.

A second concept embedded in our initial proposition is "cooperation between cultures". There is a lot of slippage here. Linguistic mediation is by definition between languages, and yet we want its goal to be something between cultures. Languages, no matter how you define them, are not quite the same as cultures, although they are of extreme psychological importance for many cultural identities. So why should we choose to place our goal in culture rather than language? Consider the following: When mediation between languages fails, the result is misunderstanding of one kind or another, and this is not very different when the sign is ostensibly non-linguistic (e.g. shaking your head in Turkey). For Chesterman (1997: 184f.) the goal of translation is thus to avoid misunderstandings, and that would be the end of the story. Yet we want something more. When there is failure in cooperation between entire cultures, the result can be far worse than a mere misunderstanding. The desire to negate the dignity of the other, for example, is a problem between cultures, not just between languages. And that desire, the zeal for the supremacy of one culture to the exclusion of others, is what we are dealing with at this beginning of this millennium. Our recent and approaching wars are not particularly between languages, nor between sexes, nor especially between social classes or economic systems, nor even between religions as theological creations or races as biological facts. The devastating struggles of our age are between cultures as complex identity structures, all trying to bring together elements on all these levels. In the Balkans and here in the Middle East, these are struggles between neighbours who understand each other's *words* only too well. The avoidance of linguistic misunderstanding will not solve the major problems, just as comprehension of the words in Hollywood films will not create cinematographic diversity, any more than decoding a Help File will liberate us from Microsoft culture. Linguistic mediation can be found in all those areas; cultures can be found on all those levels; but the aim of the exercise requires something more.

Hence our proposition, again: Linguistic mediation is only worthwhile if it can promote long-term cooperation between cultures. Something on the level of languages must improve the chances of something happening on the level of cultures, and that something has to be more than the traditional understanding (with its accrued conceptual baggage of intention, fidelity, equivalence, and similarly hypostatized ideals). Instead of understanding (a linguistic idealism), we should help opponents reach an understanding (a political compromise). The key term in our proposition is thus "cooperation". What we do linguistically must promote active cooperation, not understanding as replication of the already said.

The kind of cooperation we have in mind here is rarely a question of just being nice to each other, or of falling into line (as might be the import of Grice's "cooperative principle for conversation"). Here we are more concerned with the rationalist neo-classical principle of mutual benefits. This means creating transactions

whereby both parties gain something from the exchange, instead of the zero-sum situation where if one party wins, the other loses. Such situations are common enough, and the study of cooperation these days stretches from biology through to social economics. Yet the idea of mutual benefits is rarely applied to cultural matters. This is thanks no doubt to the insulting simplicity of economic subjectivity and to the corresponding misapprehension that benefits are only economic, rather than social or even emotional. Cooperation, however, is not only a laudable goal in the cultural field; its insistence on mutual benefits can also say something at once simple and useful about linguistic mediation.

Namely: The effort invested in mediation (the “transaction costs”) must be less than the mutual benefits likely to result. This is only common sense. If there is little to gain from an exchange, there is little point in investing effort in that exchange. This why we say “linguistic mediation is only *worthwhile* if...”. To be worth the while, the efforts we invest must bring about benefits for all the parties involved, including the mediators.

This transaction-cost principle could actually help solve a few dilemmas in translation studies. Can a translation be equivalent to all aspects of its antecedent? In principle, why not? (the so-called *effability hypothesis*); in practice, usually not, since the amount of work required would not be justified by the outcome. How much effort should be put into Internet searches, documentation, glossaries or revision? It all depends on the potential mutual benefits. Should we insert new information or delete irrelevant paragraphs (abandoning the principle of NANS - no addition, no subtraction)? Of course, if the communicative situation so requires. Should the translator favour one side or the other? Same answer: we must seek benefits for all. How can we tell when to use one form of mediation rather than another? By analyzing the mutual benefits, again, especially with respect to their extension over time. In this way, the principle of cooperation can provide guidelines not just for translation, but for all forms of linguistic mediation.

In practice, application of the cooperation principle would be telling mediators not to work too hard. And it should be telling translator trainers not to apply abstract ideals that make trainees work too hard. In each case, our efforts must be in accordance with the requirements of the exchange situation, and such situations must of course be part of what is taught. If translation and interpreting are to be socially expensive means of mediation (as we have proposed), then we should have fairly clear ideas about the kinds of situations where they are most likely to remain with the appropriate transaction costs.

So much for our proposition on general linguistic mediation. How do these various points apply to localization as a specific form of mediation?

### **Localization as a form of mediation**

The term “localization” came, I believe, from marketing. It generally refers to the processes by which a generic (“international”) product is adapted to the requirements of a “locale”, a place with a specific union of cultural and linguistic features. From that usage, it has come to refer to the way software is not only translated (usually from American English) but is also adapted to a range of features specific to a receiving locale: new legal regulations, new hotkeys, date presentations, colour codes, examples, and so on. The localization of software thus now denotes a general process of which translation is just one part. And from the field of software, the term has spread to work on websites and news services, with irregular extensions to large

documentation projects of many kinds. As such, localization merits recognition as a powerful mode of intercultural mediation. It might also hold a few keys to the future of other, simpler modes of mediation.

How, then, do localization practices fare with respect to the points we have raised above? What might they have to say about the future of our students?

Here we will try to answer those questions in terms of four features that are generally involved in localization: the role of adaptation, the technological control of complexity, teamwork, and the economics of centralized production. These terms should become clear as we go along.

### *Translation plus adaptation*

In the terms we have just used, localization would emphasize adaptation or change, rather than repetition of the already said. In localization we are not just adapting descriptions to suit the new locale, but also the referents, the product itself, which is often of a linguistic order. One would thus expect narrow conceptions of translation to play only a minor role here, since the hard work is in the adaptation. True enough, most discourses on localization restrict “translation” to the replacement of user-visible natural-language strings, leaving the more creative parts of localization projects to experts in marketing or product re-engineering. For reasons of efficiency, this involves an operational discontinuity between the two modes of mediation. The natural-language strings requiring translation are leveraged out from the rest of the product codes. They are then usually sent to people who just translate, and who only receive pay for just translating. The adaptive and more lucrative parts of localization projects go to specialists in alternative modes of mediation.

### *Technological control of complexity*

Given the large size of most localization projects, significant investments are required in the tracking and standardization of the various steps. It is simply not possible to have each translator inventing their own one-off solutions. Rather, electronic data bases are prepared and updated by specialist terminologists, coordination decisions are made with specialized project-management software, and translators are mostly working with various levels of translation-memory tools, to ensure consistency in the overall project. What does this mean for linguistic mediation? Despite the general ideology of localization processes, which would do everything possible to adapt language to the expectations of new receivers, translators are often placed in situations where they have only to repeat the given pairs, with little knowledge and less interest in the cultural particularity of the end users. Whereas the experts in marketing at least look in a forward direction at the function of their product in a culture, translators are made to look backwards to the repetition of forms from the one standardized culture. This would be the technological paradox stemming from the growing discontinuity between translation and other modes of mediation. The result is not only a paradoxically restrictive notion of translation, but also a progressive dehumanization of translated technical discourse.

### *Work in teams*

Thanks to their size and complexity, localization projects require significant degrees of teamwork. They bring together not just translators but also terminologists, revisers,

product designers, IT engineers and project managers. The need to work this way obviously means that all mediators should now be trained to work in teams. That simple fact should involve a significant shift in most of the traditional pedagogical models used in this field. Teamwork, however, has even more far-reaching implications. The more complex the team, the more the key production factor becomes the deadline. Time constraints become more important than linguistic quality; or rather, quality becomes a variable to be weighted with respect to other variables. In this, the discourse of localization is very close to the logic of transaction costs in cooperation theory: we learn to spend significant time on a task only if adequate benefits are likely to result.

The all too common upshot, however, is that remarkably little investment is made in natural-string replacement. Translators are often paid derisory percentages of global localization budgets. One might hope that complaints from users and simple marketing criteria will eventually remedy this situation (as I believe Bert Esselink will suggest later in this conference). But for the moment, the mistreatment of translators should underlie yet another lesson for translator trainers: teach your students to do more than translate. Often it is only by moving into the more high-tech sectors, or by becoming project managers, that our graduates really find liveable long-term employment. If we prepare them for no more than narrow linguistic replacement tasks, they will be no more than foot-soldiers in battles of which they will have neither vision nor control.

### *Centralized production*

Large localization projects go from one generic product into many local products. In terms of translation, they usually move from American English into a wide range of target languages. This structure is most cost-effective when the source product is pre-prepared for the localization process. The generic software, for example, may use double-digit encoding of all natural-language fonts (instead of the single-digit encoding used for English) so that the source codes can then be transferred into Oriental languages. Something similar is done with film scripts, where the source version carries copious lexical and cultural notes to assist a wide range of future versions in many languages. For that matter, Bible translators have long been used to working from an annotated generic version in English, which then serves as the source for shifts into as many languages as they like.

This model of centralized production is important for several reasons. First, it helps explain why the world demand for translations keeps growing at the same time as English assumes absolute dominance as the technological lingua franca (this is what I have elsewhere called the “diversity paradox”). Globalization, of course, requires both processes: English for the centralized production culture, and local languages for the marketing of products locally. This in turn might elucidate the functions of different modes of mediation: the learning of English brings people into the production culture, whereas the localization process keeps them in receiving cultures, in their role as global consumers. And here we consequently confront a transformation in the notion of “culture” itself: the productive centre is progressively de-regionalized, based on individuals connected by electronic networks, whereas the consuming peripheries remain regional, defined as such in their profiles as locales. More simply, the producers do not have a time zone; the consumers do.

As a complex mode of mediation, the prime goal of localization projects would be to reinforce this very separation, which may not be a good thing. However, the

processes of localization offer mid-term technological survival to the regional languages and cultures selected as significant receptor locales, which may indeed be a good thing. At this point we need to step back and consider the general effects localization can have on relations between cultures.

### **Guidelines for a future**

Linguistic mediation, I have proposed, is only worthwhile if it can promote long-term cooperation between cultures. Some of the consequences of that proposition should now be fairly patent. Most obviously, we have to train people to do more than translate, and we must be prepared to study more than translation. If we translate, we should do so expensively, in one-off or short-term situations where alternative modes of mediation are not cost-effective. If we have to manage the time and effort we put into a translation, we should do so in terms of the benefits likely to result, in order not to work too hard. And if we have to decide in favour of one communication partner or the other, we should ethically choose the path that leads to the greatest mutual benefits, on whatever level. That much is easy enough to argue, for this millennium or for any other.

What should we say, though, about localization as a complex mode of mediation? It is quite possibly the form of mediation that will dominate the immediate future of up-market mediation, if only because of its profound compatibility with economic globalization and electronic communications. But will it lead to any better kind of future? Some aspects of localization are very much in keeping with our search for cooperation between cultures. The insistence on linguistic quality as a variable, the acceptance of radical text modifications when required by situational criteria, and the creative balancing of different modes of mediation, all these are quite positive aspects. Positive also are surely the recourse to coordinated teamwork and the attention to very wide ranges of local languages and cultural norms. Localization does indeed use translation to strengthen and prolong receptor languages. In all those aspects, we should have little to fear from a localizing future.

There are, however, quite clear problems if we seek a future where cultures cooperate. Thanks to its technologies, localization tends to remove linguistic mediators from most of the positions in which they might otherwise make decisions on anything like this ethical level. Those mediators increasingly see only anterior text and obligatory glossaries; they think systemically rather than communicatively; they tend not to address people when they translate; they are thus not given to thought about cultures, let alone cooperation. Further, as the effective influences on cultural relations increasingly stem from commerce, we should not expect cooperation to gain any priority over the laws of profit. If and when linguistic diversity benefits from localization, it is because the productive culture finds profit in that outcome, which remains no more than linguistic. The same cannot really be said for *cultural* diversity. Some people learn the lingua franca and move into the electronic culture of production, others stay on the wide periphery of regional consumption, but to use Microsoft, for example, is to enter a kind of Microsoft culture, no matter what the language. Such would be one of the major trade-offs of our day: the centre makes money, the periphery has its languages on computer screens, and there is indeed benefit for both sides, albeit asymmetric and on very different levels. Within this strange form of global cooperation, we can only envisage a future of greater cultural uniformity, beneath a deceptive veneer of linguistic diversity and within what is well documented as a widening technology gap.

Is there a way to avoid the negative side of this future? If there is, it will probably not come from within the laws of commerce. However, something might yet spring from the remnants of our humanisms. We can accept, without too much trouble, that we have to train people for many modes of mediation, as a postmodern version of the Renaissance all-rounder. We should also clearly give students the best available technological competencies, since technical complexity is the key to their future power. But then, if the long-term goal is to be cooperation rather than one-sided profit, we should also give our students a critical awareness of the forces shaping their future.

Which is more or less what I hope I have done here today.

## **References**

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