

Translation and economics: rational decisions, competing tongues, and measured literacy

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A personal past

“Translation scholar seeks help from economics.” It sounds nice, but relations are rarely that neat, especially when it comes to the many different kinds of people who wander through Translation Studies.

Economics, in a sense, has always been there. It was there when I was an undergraduate in the 1970s, since we were all Marxists, more or less; we had to read Marx, more or less; so we had to understand the basics of Marxist economics, mostly less – it was a part of being an intellectual of the age, along with Freud and Nietzsche and incipient whiffs of deconstruction. The danger of that kind of ideological mash-up, of course, is that you think you know the disciplines, as if Marx were all economics, or Freud all sciences of the psyche, or Derrida all of philosophy, and our received orthodoxies only needed to be demonstrated within our own community, time and again. That kind of facile flamboyance served me well enough through to the early 1980s, when I studied in the Paris of the first Mitterrand years, for much the same reasons.

Yet the economics part of the deal took on a new shape slightly later, in the United States, when I shared an apartment with a student of political negotiations (she is now Professor of European Studies at Oxford) and a Chicago-school student of economics (he is now Professor of Microeconomics in Dacca). So in the late nights, over take-away pizzas and (then new) MTV, I would argue with my Bangladeshi game-theorizing economist about why it was wrong to assume people were rational egoists (a great argument to have, in retrospect, as recognized by the 2013 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences to three scholars who had worked on more or less this question); and on less indulgent occasions I would argue with my Greek-French negotiation expert about why it was naïve to believe that people really sought cooperation, in the sense of mutual benefits. At the time, you see, I was playing the role of the leftist student of Comparative Literature, with no special concern for translation, and no great need to lower the critical guard. Despite my knee-jerk resistance, I had come up against a different kind of economics, strongly marked by game theory, Chicago School calculations, and justifications of unfettered markets, which I instinctively saw as something to oppose.

Four ideas lifted from economics

Parts of neo-classical economics eventually won out: I finished up borrowing a few simple ideas over the years, mostly from theories of cooperation and negotiations, mostly not from anything remotely *engagé* or close to critical theory. Here are the ideas lifted from the neo-classical hatchery:

- *Cooperation as an ethical aim of cross-cultural exchanges* (Pym 1997, 2000a): The idea that a communicative exchange can bring benefits for all parties is at least as old as Adam Smith's "invisible hand" (1776: 4.2). When applied to translation theory, it can give an ethical aim for the kind of cross-cultural communication that translators assist in. And that is a more powerful, socialized aim than the static alternatives available in equivalence theory and the like.
- *Translation as a transaction cost* (Pym 1995): In order for mutual benefits to be achieved, they must be greater than the costs put into organizing and carrying out the exchange. The latter are the "transaction costs." This suggests that some cheaper forms of translation (or alternatives to translation) may be justified in some circumstances. The idea was appealing, and potentially critical, at a time when most theories identified "translation" with the work of highly paid professionals.
- *Translator-client negotiations as a case of asymmetric information* (Chan 2008, Pym, Grin, Sfreddo, Chan 2012). Translators might generally be presumed to know more about the quality of their work than do their clients (assuming that clients seek translations because they do not understand the foreign language well). This means that translators are able to bend the truth when representing the value of their work, and that the whole market might be riddled with degrees of such misrepresentation. When the lies stray too far from actual quality, clients do not know whom to trust, translator fees go down, and good translators leave the market. Since such forms of "adverse selection" have indeed affected sectors of the translation industry, the model is of special interest. And adverse selection in turn explains why some form of translator certification is necessary.
- *Translating as an exercise in risk management* (Pym 2004/2005, 2008a): Taking the above logic one step further, the greatest risk the translator faces might be loss of trust (by clients or receivers), so translation decisions can be seen as ways of gaining or maintaining that trust, rather than just representing a foreign text. Analysis in terms of this kind of risk management allows some decisions to be characterized as high-risk, while others are of no importance at all – or some parts of a text are high-risk, others are low-risk, and the translator can rationally act in different ways according to these pragmatic values. In low-risk situations translators might happily use omission, generalization, and other solutions not usually condoned by approaches based on equivalence. The same logic allows one to propose that, in professional situations, the taking of high risks should align with high rewards (this is at least as old as Pascal's wager, formulated in 1660),

and that translators tend not to take high risks because they tend not to be offered correspondingly substantial rewards (as intimated by Leonardo Bruni in 1405).

Those four ideas are based on a rationality of person-to-person communication, as expressed in models of decision-making processes. Although the ideas can be applied to any kind of linguistic interaction at all, the assumption underlying their use here is that translation occurs at the extremes of shared referents, at the points where the risks of mistrust and non-cooperation are relatively greater than in alternative modes of communication, and where the transaction costs are also relatively higher. In these terms, translation differs from other modes of communication in degree, not nature, and a piece of economics can help measure that degree.

Some basic methodological virtues

In retrospect, I think the attraction of this approach was so much in the ideas themselves as it was in a few methodological fellow travellers, which tend to concern economics as a wider discipline (variously defined as studying the distribution and use of scarce resources):

- Economic values are presumed to be *quantifiable*, not only in monetary terms but more significantly in the degrees of positive and negative appetite that a subject may manifest (someone desires or fears A more than B, and so desire and fear become measurable). Coming from the study of literature, from book after book of moralistic presumptions, universal homilies, critique on critique, and similarly self-assertive pap, I found this quantitative relativization of values a welcome invitation to serious thought. Even when the attribution of quantities was initially so simplistic as to insult intelligence, it remained a challenge to clever thought, in a way that critical theory never was. If a model was too simple, more variables could always be factored in.
- Economic modeling necessarily simplified complex situations, but in so doing it gained a degree of *formalization* that I found intellectually attractive, and occasionally beautiful. Cooperation (the attainment of mutual benefits) remains a sublime ethical aim, no matter how naïve one might consider it to be in practice. The relation between asymmetric information and market disorder has something of the same aesthetic appeal. There is beauty in these ideas.
- Thanks to the formal quantification, economics offered an eminently *empirical* mode of study. You did your modeling, you tested the relations in the abstract, then you got data from the world and tried to see how well the model explained the data. And when the fit was not good, you went back and altered the model, and so on. This was attractive because it offered a *discovery process* of some kind. (True, this sort of thing also happens in much of linguistics, for example, where the data need not be so quantitative, but it was not really happening in

Comparative Literature or Translation Studies at the time.) This mode of empiricism enabled ideas to be tested, and ideologies thereby to be challenged.

- And then, thanks to this dialectal empiricism, economics could occasionally offer what looked like *solutions*. For example, in the transaction cost model, you can put in three different sets of values (high translation costs, low translation costs, and costs in between), compare the three abstract situations, and calculate which one should give you the optimal outcome. When applying something similar in order to compare the costs of translation and language learning as policy options, I found that the key variable was the time frame of the communicative situation concerned (Pym 2004: 148). François Grin (in Grin et al. 2014) is adopting precisely that kind of highly theorized empiricism with his model of how multilingualism policies can favor both mobility and social inclusion at the same time, by identifying situations where the values are balanced in such a way as to allow a trade-off. If a theory or policy decides that any one of those values is an absolute (complete multilingualism at any cost, for example, or an eternal time frame for all speech acts), then there is no possible solution – the initial presupposition becomes the only possible solution, as in all absolutist ideologies.
- Solutions in economics can be not only formal and elegant, but also *ethical*. Cooperation, where an interaction produces (not necessarily equal) benefits for all parties, is a model of an ethically laudable minimalist relation. Although several more resounding ethical values can be built upon it (notably fairness, which is a little more difficult), cooperation itself happens all the time; it is the promise of all conversational exchanges that continue; it is rarely appreciated.

Some basic political shortcomings

Despite those virtues, my applications of those four ideas have had virtually no effect on the course of Translation Studies. The reasons are perhaps not hard to guess:

- A model based on cooperation is anathema to activist positions that are based on building up opposition to bad things. The zero-sum game model (you win, they lose) is much easier to explain and remains more likely to attract sycophants, as has been happening in narrative niches of Translation Studies.
- A model that finds mathematical justification for cheap translations and otherwise non-start-text-based solutions (omission, generalization, approximation) is not exactly music to the ears of translation professionals, who might want the world to appreciate how hard their tasks are and how expensive their services should be. This particular economic model implicitly subverts a long-standing unspoken pact between researchers and professionals, as evidenced, for example, in all the theorists' diagrams of the competencies and virtues that the best professionals should always exercise, or so non-empirical studies would have us believe.

- A model based on asymmetric information (and thus on “bent truths”) was never going to attract the same professionals, who would never admit to anything except the highest quality presented with the purest truths. The model also cuts uncomfortably close to the bone of the translation companies (almost all of them) that basically sell accuracy but pay for speed.
- Finally, to propose that translators primarily act in order to maintain trust, rather than actually to reproduce a foreign text faithfully, was never going to enthrall the institutions and technologies based on linguistic equivalence. By the same token, anyone who suggests that translators should take more risks and be paid in accordance with the results would seem to run counter to a professional mindset that is generally risk-averse, bureaucratic, and perhaps still servile.

In short, my applications of ideas from economics tend to be more critical than comforting for the people who sometimes get enthusiastic about translation research or who might seek to apply our findings... if, indeed, the ideas have ever reached any such people.

Two examples of missing economics

Should the case for economic thought have been made in stronger, clearer, and wider terms? Undoubtedly. Here are two instances of simple arguments that clearly run aground because of a lack of attention to quantities – this is where a bit of economics might have helped.

The first is the commonplace observation that translations account for less than four per cent of books published in English, while the proportion is regularly above 20 per cent for many European languages. So we are told that there is a global imbalance in the translation flows, and that this is unethical, a sign of cultural hegemony (as argued elaborately in Venuti 1995). Simple mathematics (not necessarily economics) can nevertheless show that the languages producing many books are going to have lower percentages of translations into them, and languages producing few books will have higher percentages, so there is no necessary imbalance indicated in these particular percentages (see the calculations in Ginsburgh and Weber 2011). I have been trying to point this out for over a decade (since Pym 1999, Pym and Chrupala 2004), but the elementary mistake is still being made:

Because the rate of translation into English is so low – roughly 2-4% of annual book output in the United States and the United Kingdom, compared to 20-25% in countries like Italy and Spain – a reader may be unable to find a selection of translations from the work of the same foreign author, even from the same language. (Venuti 2013: 114)

You can easily check the quantitative reasoning by testing the model on a few numbers (yes, use empiricism). For the period 1995-2000 the *Index Translationum* lists 33,663 titles translated into English, as opposed to less than half that (15,744) into Italian. So

which language is likely to have more translations of a given foreign author? As I say, this has more to do with simple mathematics than with anything arcanelly economic, but the worrying thing is that such fantasies are repeated and republished without anyone in Translation Studies taking even a little time to check a few actual numbers. Are we really so numerically illiterate?

My second example is found in the similarly simplistic reasoning of Eric Pickles, the UK Secretary of State for Communities, who has famously ordered that translations *not* be provided for immigrants, since translation services “have an unintentional, adverse impact on integration by reducing the incentive for some migrant communities to learn English” (2013). In a commonsense world, that argument sounds reasonable, even though no empirical evidence is presented to back it up. So does it hold up to scrutiny?

A version of critical discourse analysis can certainly attack Mr. Pickles’ argument by undoing the way it makes gratuitous assumptions about immigrant communities (see, for instance, Schäffner 2009). However, such critique will rarely get the likes of Mr. Pickles to change his mind; for him and his ilk, it will look like just another academic malcontent preaching to the converted. On the other hand, it is not difficult to locate some hard data showing, for instance, that language services in hospitals can actually *reduce* health costs. Lindholm et al. (2012), in a study of over 3,000 patients with limited English proficiency, found that the use of professional interpreters correlated with significantly shorter hospital stays and a lower likelihood of readmission within 30 days. That is, translation and interpreting can save money, especially when these services are well targeted (not all studies show savings). Since the punch line in Mr. Pickles’ argument is that public costs have to be cut, that economic kind of calculation *is* perhaps likely to have some effect on policy.

A Translation Studies that criticizes official discourse can certainly create some kind of knowledge and stimulate thought. Yet a Translation Studies that can also *measure quantities* stands a greater chance of influencing power.

I have been fairly happy with the ideas borrowed from economics, and with the limited areas in which I have tried to apply them: transaction cost analysis, translator-client interactions, translator certification, pragmatic process studies, a certain ethics of effort distribution. Those applications, however, remain very marginal when compared with the work of the few economists who have found time to consider translation seriously.

Starting from the economics of languages

As I look back on that work now, I am a little surprised that my models of translation remained so narrowly tied to communicative *situations*. In assuming that translation, in its economies, was different from other communicative modes in terms of degree, not nature, I effectively downplayed the requirement that at least two different languages be involved: there were certainly heightened risks of misunderstanding (in the situation), but one of the basic causes of those risks (language diversity) was of comparatively little interest.

That is one way to explain why I did not set out from any economics of languages as such, and why my few ideas have remained miles away from the general approach

pioneered by François Grin, among others. True, there was virtually no work on the economics of languages at the time (Rossi-Landi 1975 had thrown around a few Marxist terms on the level of epistemology, but there was not much else I could use), so I was not exactly ignoring a tradition. Our biographical starting points have simply been different.

If you start out from the plurality of languages, from linguistic diversity, you inevitably address questions that are quite different from those that have concerned me: What are the ethical values of different kinds of multilingualism? Which public language policies are fairest? How much does it cost to maintain a plurality of languages? Which languages should be taught, how, and at what cost? Which languages should be translated? What are the relative costs of translation as opposed to the use of a lingua franca or other communication options? Only with respect to this last question (which involves transaction costs) do my concerns start to overlap with the economics of language. The other issues, much larger and much more concerned with language policy, are not problems with which my humble use of economic notions has engaged at all.

I want to suggest that this is not entirely out of historical ignorance. Or rather, it derives in part from my perplexity at some of the assumptions made in the economics of languages. On several different levels, I have basically been worried about the way the quantification of data allows for the testing of correlations, but not of actual *causation*, and yet the economists of language do tend to intimate causes. This sometimes leaves me scratching my head.

Here is a simple example to illustrate the problem (it does not really concern languages, but it is a useful illustration). When members of the Société Française des Traducteurs report earning higher rates of pay than non-members do (see Pym, Grin, Sfreddo, Chan 2012: 40, 109), it could be because membership gives them an added advantage in the marketplace, which would explain why they pay to be members. At the same time, however, it could be that only the higher-paid translators have enough disposable income to *become* members. Simple correlations will not tell you which cause is in play. For that, you have to become more sociological and talk to actual people. You have to ask them why they make certain choices and not others. If you don't talk to people, if you have no sociological or psychological weapons in your research arsenal, you will never really know.

This same 'apparent causation' problem becomes more acute when, for example, the language industries are described as a "rich source of income" for the EU economy (European Commission 2009: vi), ostensibly on the basis of company turnovers. But since the payments are mostly *coming* from the EU economy, there is no statistical basis for estimating how much *new* income might actually be generated by translation services (from enhanced exports, for example, or the benefits of merging markets that are in different languages, as in Tamura 2001). Somehow, economic activity is being described as wealth, in a way that I struggle to understand. Put more provocatively, if you have ten rather than five fire engines (or translation companies), you are not automatically generating twice the wealth: it depends on how many fires (or cross-cultural misunderstandings) you have to put out, and the benefits must then be measured in terms of the fire damage that was prevented. Or have I somehow not seen the appropriate cause? Is the wealth supposed to be language diversity in itself? (I will soon return to this.)

Another example: An abstract model demonstrates that internal translation costs in the European Union institutions could be reduced by as much as 50 per cent through the use of “intercomprehension,” where two people both use their different L1s but have passive competence in the L1 of the other (Grin 2008a: 86-94; European Commission 2012: 30-32). That is, if Spanish, French, Italian, and Portuguese are assumed to be in the same cluster, an internal document in Italian need not be translated into those other languages, since all the speakers in the cluster can be trained to read Italian well enough. Here the causation is thankfully clear: if you impose intercomprehension, these savings will result. The methodological problem is then to explain why virtually no institutions adopt this solution, and why actual speakers tend not to stay in the space of intercomprehension. Are speakers duped by uneconomical ideas? Are people basically stupid? Or are there causes more powerful than efficiency? Is there something missing from the economic modeling, something along the lines of social psychology and the affective values of language choice? Once again, you ultimately have to talk with people, to seek out the reasons for their language choices.

Similar comments could be made, of course, for calculations that the European Union’s currently 23 official languages could be reduced to just six (Ginsburgh and Weber 2011), which would reduce translation costs in a way comparable to Grin’s calculations for intercomprehension. If it is so efficient to do so, then why is it not being done? Somewhere along the line, the economic models are supposed to be tested on the basis of the decisions that are actually made, then corrected accordingly. I can’t see that happening in the economics of languages.

In these last cases where I have trouble separating causes from effects, it is probably because I assume language diversity to be the *cause* of problems to solve (this is where translators start from, of course), rather than a *good* that is to be preserved and enhanced (which is where ideologies of language maintenance begin). So why are potential misunderstandings between speakers of different languages not like fires that have to be put out? Because some of us like the fires? They keep us warm? Or more to the point, do those fires provide the energy that we, as members of “the lesser examination-passing classes” (Hobsbawm 1990: 118), are able to harness into our own minor powers?

There is a real issue here of how to measure the value of a language. The temptation, when you start out from the need to maintain linguistic diversity, is to assume that a language is indeed an absolute good in itself, rather than an instrument for the production of other values. This is rather like Stalin (1950/1954: 5) arguing that (the Russian) language was not to be considered a means of production: “Language is not a product of one or another base, old or new, within the given society, but of the whole course of the history of the society and of the history of the bases for many centuries.” On this view, a language embeds the identity of a whole people, and must be maintained for humanistic reasons, as an end rather than a means. Further, when this moralistic claim has been expressed by some form of “political will” (Stalinist or otherwise), language diversity gains the value of adhering to a promise, a point of honor. As such, the value of a language cannot be compared with anything else in terms of quantities; it escapes from the logics of efficiency; it is not economic: its value has become somehow pre-economic, operative in its own space of finalities.

That is where I lose the plot. The attraction of economics, for me, was precisely its avoidance of such absolute, moral values. So to see them creeping in through the back door is rather disquieting.

There are several alternatives to this: you can see how people actually evaluate languages (as I have argued must be done sooner or later); you can ask them what kind of sacrifices they would make to retain a language; and you can attempt an economics of fair diversity. Let me briefly consider these in turn.

Observe how people value languages

It is common enough to find that people attach different values (quantitatively economic but also affective) to the languages in their repertoire (see Busch 2010), and that they thus prefer to use some languages rather than others. That is, speakers make daily choices about what kind of diversity to maintain, including which languages to give up or not pass on to future generations. Within the past 80 years, speakers of Béarnais, for example, have massively moved to French as a home language; affluent urban families around Cape Town prefer English to Xhosa; the use of Dutch on the island of Curaçao has all but given way to the standardization of Papiamentu, and so on. Those daily decisions are not always on the level of “political will”; often (not always) they go against official policy, operating on the level of “social behavior.” Indeed, many language policies are formulated precisely to check or counteract such socially based cases of language shift. The policies are only necessary because people are making their own decisions as well.

Ask people to choose languages

Ginsburgh and Weber (2011), as provocative economists, suggest that citizens be consulted on what the official status of their languages should be, and that this can be done in crudely financial terms. For instance, instead of simply accepting that Maltese must be an official language of the European Union, the people of Malta could be asked whether they want to renounce that official status and receive the corresponding costs in cash: some 500 euros per person per year, since official status (involving many translations) is expensive (Ginsburgh and Weber 2011: 194-195). Admittedly, this is an extreme case. Yet the principle is worth retaining: ask the speakers rather than make assumptions on the basis of an indirectly formulated “political will.” And the questions asked can be rigorously economic, if you like. As Ginsburgh and Weber put it, in a slightly less provocative mode, “the EU will have to shift its emphasis from national concerns to those of individual citizens” (2011: 181).

Calculate fairness

One further kind of response is elegant, similarly provocative, and still in economics. Grin (e.g. 2005, 2008b) sets out to calculate the costs of various language regimes. In the case of the European Union institutions, he estimates the variable translation costs and concludes, unlike Ginsburgh and Weber, that they are not the key point: the expense “is likely to be well below Europeans’ willingness to pay for services that would ensure

continued recognition of their language” (2008b: 79). So here there is apparently no need to ask people, or to study how they actually select languages or agree to pay for them. Grin’s concern is with something else.

To simplify things, let’s say Grin compares a Europe with just one official language to a Europe with several (he includes other possibilities, which I will address in another place). He observes that if the one selected language is the mother tongue of some speakers, then those speakers receive an advantage, and that this is unfair. Further, the degree of unfairness can be calculated. If you estimate what non-English-speaking countries spend on language learning and services and compare it with what is spent on foreign-language costs in the United Kingdom, you find that the United Kingdom spends far less, so it is benefiting financially from the privileged position of English. The difference has been estimated at some 10 billion euros a year, at least (Grin 2005: 7, 94; 2008b: 81) – some 2.2 billion of which can be seen as costs of translation and interpreting that need not be done for the United Kingdom (Grin 2005: 87). These sums can be seen as an “uncompensated transfer” to the United Kingdom. And this is unfair, says Grin. The economics of language is thus able to formulate and defend what looks like a moral value.

So what is fairness here? In Grin’s model, maximum fairness would actually be an official language that is no one’s mother tongue, such as Esperanto in the European Union, but one might also mention cases like English in India. Grin also mentions, as a textbook example of “fair transfer,” the money that “flows from households without children to households with children, as a result of the financing of public education through tax revenue” (2005: 82). This is presumably fair because the whole of society benefits from public education. “Fairness” thus does not concern strict equality, but degrees of inequality that, for me, maintain the potential of long-term mutual benefits. Other interpretations are possible: this is a long discussion reaching from Aristotle’s geometric calculation of fair recompense (Book 5 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*) to Rawls’ concept of inequalities benefiting the least-advantaged members of society (1971, 2001), concerning much more than languages or translation. The point that interests me here is simply that, as Grin shows, an economics of language can calculate a degree of *unfairness* (and thus perhaps of fairness, if the relative advantages of an unequal language regime can also be estimated).

That said, can you formulate that moral value without actually asking people or trying to explain what they actually decide to do? If those unfair virtual transfers are being made, why do people put up with them? Out of pure ignorance, again? Or are there other variables involved?

Grin’s economic abstraction raises a series of questions of a more sociolinguistic nature. For example, can we really reduce subjects, citizens, to just one value, an assumed mother tongue because of geographical location (2005: 83)? How many people actually have just one language system (most of the world’s speakers are polyglots)? Does the assumption of monolingualism only apply to larger, centralized societies? Is the function of a language just to be recognized, cherished, admired as an object, or is it also productive of value? If productivity does count (so that some benefits can be distributed), does the value of a language come from basic grammar or from something like communicative skills in particular domains? What is the level of language competence

required to enter into such calculations? And then, surely people in the United Kingdom have to learn how to use English in order to attain certain levels of productivity?

Thanks to its willfully atrophied view of language in society, the economic modeling remains usefully provocative, raising more questions than it answers. Perhaps those are the kinds of questions that should be asked of people.

Should translators work for language diversity?

In a more recent polemical paper, Grin (2010) sees the relation between translation and language diversity in terms of a basic mutual dependency: translation requires language diversity for its very existence (since it works between languages), and language diversity requires translation for part of its own maintenance over time (since if there were no translation, smaller languages could be used less and lingua francas could be used more). Those relations are then complicated by language policies and local factors, but the mutual dependence remains. Formally, that makes sense.

Grin argues that Translation Studies has generally ignored that very basic relation: “it is as if translation, though *epistemologically* situated, were, save for a few exceptions, *phenomenologically* isolated, as if there were not much of a ‘before’ or an ‘after’ to translation” (2010: 4). That is, we have not sufficiently looked at the degree to which our social role is a response to language diversity, at how our continued professional existence actively depends on language diversity, and at how translations can help to maintain and develop threatened languages. In my limited use of economic notions, outlined above, I am certainly guilty of precisely that kind of limited vision. Further, says Grin, since we all want to continue doing what we are doing, apparently, “it is in the interest of translators and interpreters to enter the fray and become explicitly supportive of language policies in favour of multilingualism—as well as of the research that provides the ammunition for such language policies” (2010: 16).

That is a strong criticism, marginally couched in economic terms but now with a marked appeal to moral values of the more pugilistic, even activist kind (no matter how much it is justified by the economic “virtual transfer” argument). Since this moralistic call to action comes close to the kind of thing that I sought to escape from when borrowing from economics, I pause to respond.

If translators and translation scholars have *not* generally picked up these particular cudgels, why have they not done so? And why *should* they do so now?

One suitably economic reason could be that the global increase in interlingual communication has been such that English has grown as a lingua franca *at the same time* as the market for translations has expanded (Pym 2006), so translators and translation scholars have not experienced any direct threat of reduced demands – quite the contrary, globalization has been very good for us economically. How can this be so? One explanation of this “diversity paradox” (Pym 2008) lies in the fact that, as Grin recognizes, most translations are from central languages (predominantly English) into less central ones, in a functional separation of production (done in central languages) from distribution and consumption (done in less central languages). And for the translations that go the other way, there are not enough L1 English translators to go around, so we have witnessed the rise of translators working into English as their L2 or

L3. That is, the types, functions, contents, and extensions of translations are not uniform – those factors depend on directionality, which is in turn a response to changes in the configuration of language diversity.

So it is not that we have been blind to the cause of multilingual policies – it is just that we have benefitted from the way the world turns without them, and there have been other, more immediate problems to attend to. Some of those other concerns are, dare I say, of greater historical weight. Perhaps the cause of language diversity should be painted on a canvas of several centuries, rather than derived from a comparison of abstract models.

I spent about eight years studying translators and interculturalities in Hispanic history (Pym 2000), from the twelfth century to the present. No one could say that those studies ignore the “before” and “after” of translation: the various chapters recount the passage of Greek science through Syriac, Arabic, Latin, and the vernaculars; the Qur’an was translated several times as part of a struggle against Islam; the Alfonsine translations into Castilian attempted to impose national standards (yes, translation can *limit* diversity by standardizing just one variety, in the thirteenth century and again under Franco); translations of a Latin Plato struggled to introduce humanist ideas; retranslations of the Bible attempted to control and unify religious beliefs; and so on. If I look back on those studies, there were numerous causes involved, numerous long-term aims and actual effects, and numerous uses of translation to limit rather than enhance language diversity. Even the cases that *were* in support of multilingual policies are not without ulterior motives. Sixteenth-century missionary interculturalities did use translation to standardize and extend the use of Nahuatl and Quechua, creating and defending a multilingual colonial culture. That particular use of translation was nevertheless not in the interests of language diversity for its own sake: the interculturality retained power by controlling movements between languages—the Catholic Church has used multilingualism as an instrument of power at least since the Council of Tours in 813 (Balibar 1985). Further, the standardization of those selected languages went hand in hand with a massive reduction in actual diversity: there may have been some 170 language families on the American continent at the time of first conquest (Martinell Gifré 1992: 157). And the defeat of the sixteenth-century multilingual policy was due to the Consejo de Indias moving in 1596 to win back political control over processes that were hidden in languages it did not understand. In the seventeenth century, Spanish was imposed in the interests of state (not church) political power.

No one can deny that a certain language diversity is necessary for translation to take place, and that one of the effects of translation can be to prolong that diversity (translation habitually strengthens the borders it crosses, separating language groups). That can even become a major aim: for example, I once translated a book from Catalan to English on Google Translator Toolkit, selecting that tool precisely because my work would help build up the database for Catalan-English translation and thereby reduce the tool’s dependency on Spanish as an intermediary language (yes, a form of “intercomprehension” is used within statistical machine translation). Less sublimely, at the Barcelona Olympic Games in 1992, official translations were into English, French, Spanish, and Catalan, with the latter language being there purely for reasons of identity politics. The poor Catalan translators in the Press Office were always the last to leave at night, since they did not have the same time constraints as the others and therefore there were fewer of them, for the simple reason that all the “client” journalists were able to get

the information in at least one of the other languages (Pym 1996). In that case the translators' task, politically necessary, was unrewarding. Many of us in Europe have similarly been employed by outsourcers from the European Union institutions to translate texts for which there will be no actual readers, just as occasionally I listen in to conference interpreters in Brussels only because no one else is enjoying the benefits of their magnificent art. These have been termed "existential translations," texts that serve a policy function merely by virtue of their existence. In professional terms, they are disheartening. In political terms, they suggest we are living in denial.

The relation between language diversity and translation, stressed by Grin, is really a small part of the deal. It works on the level of what Aristotle calls the material cause: things that have to be there so that work can begin. Actual translators also have to attend to the priorities of the final cause (the aim of communication in each case), the formal cause (the maintenance of translation as a socially operative form based on trust), and the efficient cause (the well-being of translators themselves) (Pym 1997). The idea that translators are somehow mainly working for the good of a policy, rather than to communicate knowledge, enhance understanding, or make a living, is almost an insult to our complex self-image as communicators.

One further possible reason for our failure to enter the language-policy fray is that, sociologically, there must be some doubt as to whether translators and interpreters actually constitute a group with common economic interests of this kind. We tend to be people with languages and communication skills, able to do many things: when we are not translating, we can teach languages, do technical writing and copyediting, become terminologists, and otherwise communicate professionally. We are a protean social group, able to adapt to language demands of many different kinds. This can be seen in the way the English-language sections of the Directorate General for Translation have adjusted to the increasing use of English, with their tasks shifting in favor of language revision or copyediting rather than translation. This might also be a way of reading the indications that about 60 per cent of the world's translators and interpreters work part-time (Pym et al. 2012: 88): we are able to do many other things. We do not necessarily depend on multilingualism for our livelihood.

The appeal to language diversity as a simple moral value is more relativized in some of Grin's more recent work, where the maintenance of diversity is counterbalanced by the need for mobility, thus opening the possibility of a series of trade-offs between the two aims (see Grin et al. 2014). I am happy to participate in the research project based on that trade-off model; I would have more serious doubts if the project sought to conscript translators and translation scholars into a one-sided cause.

Parting proposition: Literacy as a quantifiable aim

I would like to close with a proposal, one that moves part of the way towards Grin's larger view of translation contexts (as I said, my use of economics remains guilty of limited vision) at the same time as it recognizes something like a moral aim for translation services, in terms not of geometric fairness but of discursive inclusion.

Studies of language costs in health services increasingly describe their aim as being to enhance "health literacy," defined as "the degree to which individuals have the

capacity to obtain, process and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions” (US Department of Health and Human Services 2000: 11/20). In public policy, the concept appears to have its origins in the United States, where it has functioned as a surrogate for English as an official language on the national level: “literacy” is used in laws that refer explicitly to “literacy in the *English* language” (e.g. the National Literacy Act of 1991 and the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act of 1998). The concept can nevertheless be liberated from those origins: literacy can be the capacity to use information in order to make responsible decisions in any field whatsoever, regardless of the languages concerned. Indeed, such literacy could ultimately be compatible with Habermas’s view that citizens should be able to “view themselves jointly as authors of the laws” (Habermas 1995: 130), since some kind of political literacy would require precisely that level of informed decision-making.

In the current context I am merely concerned with two points, both of which follow from my questioning of Grin’s reduction of language to the mother-tongue variable: first, knowing a language system is not enough (many people speak an official language but do not have basic health literacy in it); second, appropriate information need not be in just one language (people can have acceptable health literacy in English, Spanish, or any other language that they understand, no matter what the official language). The importance of these two points is made clear in reports like the following:

Only 33 per cent of people born overseas have adequate or better health literacy compared to 43 per cent of the Australian-born population. This figure drops to 27 per cent for those who arrived in Australia during the past five years and to 26 per cent for people whose first language is not English. (Ethnic Communities’ Council of Victoria 2012: 12)

If seen in these terms, literacy becomes a very interesting goal for translation, and indeed for all forms of mediation (which then starts to include pedagogical discourse as well). The aim of translation is then not just to render a foreign text, but to help people actually use the knowledge productively. The point has been made to me in a slightly different way in South Africa, where the ambitious translation policy is too often seen as concerning *how many* texts reach how many languages, while the more important question is often *what kind* of translation is employed. Given the different levels of decision-making literacy across the various communities, the goal in many cases must be not just to reproduce texts, but to make them accessible. From that perspective, translation is not just one thing: it contains key variables within it.

So that is my one proposed contribution to an ongoing exchange: rather than just count languages and translations as data for economics, why not also quantify various kinds of specific decision-making literacies?

Many of these more democratizing aims, along with methodological problems like causation, risk becoming invisible when economists start flashing their formulas and numbers, dazzling us with a science of reduced variables. Economics, for all its limitations, nevertheless has the advantage of sounding like the kind of language in which major decisions are made. Without some basic literacy in the discourse of economics, we not only risk misunderstanding what they are saying, but we could be letting them make decisions for us. We ignore that particular literacy at our peril.

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