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Translation: factory, dialogue, or network? competing translation practices in BBC transcultural journalism

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Abstract

Drawing on interdisciplinary theories of translation and empirical research into the BBC World Service, I propose a set of three conceptual metaphors to model mediabased translation work. 'Factory', 'dialogue' and 'network' can each serve as a metaphor for the processes of interlingual and transcultural journalism by international broadcasters. Rather than periodizing these historically, I propose that all three metaphors, from the Fordist centralized factory via the user-friendly dialogue rhetoric to the seemingly power-free digital network, can best be seen as concurrent and competing journalistic processes in daily dynamic interaction, whether they concern centralized practices or user-generated contents.

Key words

BBC WORLD SERVICE, TRANSLATION, FACTORY, DIALOGUE NETWORK, USER-GENERATED CONTENT, TRANSEDITING

The metaphor of a translation 'factory' may, historically, recall a Fordist era of centralised mass production and top-down communication to customers. 'Dialogic' translation may recall the 1980s and 1990s dream of a globally free and unhindered exchange of information and political initiatives across language and semiotic boundaries. The 'network' metaphor of translation may seem to stand for the latest phase of a neo-liberal market model of cultural production. Yet as we shall propose, all three practices interact, and indeed melt into each other, in the daily processes of journalistic translation. This approach draws on theoretical perspectives from cultural semiotics (Lotman, 1990) and the recent work that combines translation studies with the agenda of representing and inter-mediating cultural diversity (Ang, 1985; Cronin 2005; Deuze, 2007; Bielsa and Bassnett, 2009; Baumann and Gillespie, 2010).

Cheesman and Nohl (this issue) usefully differentiate both conceptually and empirically between three interrelated processes — globalising, localising or relocalising — in the translation operation of the BBC WS. Each operation is underpinned by the complex mechanisms of gate-keeping and trans-editing. (Hoskins and O'Loughlin 2010).

Translation Processes as a Fordist Factory

The metaphor of a factory was, and remains, well-rooted among BBC World Service journalists. Solohubenko (2006, 2009) recognises this approach from within Bush House. The BBC's institutional structure saw the global newsroom as a central hub of world-wide communication. It worked by triangulation. It produced, reproduced, and trans-edited news bulletins gathered from the main international agencies, the BBC Monitoring Service, and from the globally unequalled network of BBC journalists and correspondents around the world. All materials were made available and translated into all broadcast languages by respective language services, 'with little input into what was being broadcast by [any of the] language services [themselves]' (Solohubenko, 2009). In addition to the central newsroom, there were a number of so-called news-talk departments, responsible for developing newsroom material considered of interest to regional sections (Walker, 1992: 97). Talk-writers would write English-language backgrounders to news stories or explain the significance of a topic to linguistically divided audiences (Bulic 2010; Thiranagama 2010, in this Special Issue). From the beginning of BBC foreign-language broadcasting (1938), there has been an irreducible tension between the World Service as a translation factory and the same World Service functioning as a relativizing agency, serving each audience with something approaching their own terms and standards (Cronin, 2005). Deuze (2007: 15) starkly contrasts this old Fordist regime of 'endless reproduction' as the antithesis of today's networked production, consumption and distribution of commodities, services and information (Deuze, 2007: 15). Perhaps one can challenge Deuze's periodization. Admittedly, the 'dialogic turn' of the late 1970s was subjectively experienced as a journalistic revolution. A former journalist in the **BBC Hindi Service recounts:**

We were delivered from the rarefied heights of the newsroom, individual items of news for our respective bulletins. We were not authorised to edit any news item or even change the news order. We were even sent the news order, all this by hand from the newsroom via a Heath Robinson messenger service that occasionally created hilarious situations as we approached the deadline to rush helter skelter to some distant studio on a different floor or even sometimes a different building (Budhwar, 2009).

The in-house humour is confirmed by Walker who caricatures the in-house, top-down newsroom systems as 'elderly ladies in carpet slippers' rushing up and down staircases to deliver individual bulletins (Walker, 1992: 97). A more pragmatic assessment of the Fordist translation system sees it as a 'rather lengthy and rigid procedure' (Solohubenko, 2009). As Solobhenko suggests 'Say, you knew that there's an important story about some events in Central Russia, you didn't put it together yourself, but you took the story to the newsroom editor who looked at it and wrote a piece, then it came back to you, and you could broadcast it only then' (Solobhenko, 2009). Caistor (2006) claims that 'they [the BBC] didn't trust the locals [in their various language services] to give impartial views. When they advertised then, they advertised for translators not journalists' (Caistor, 2006). These personal accounts by long-term journalistic staff suggest a strictly top-down approach to translation, inadvertently generating a professional culture ripe with controversies, heated disagreements and moral dilemmas. Yet a more complex story of translation is visible in the genre of the 'talk'. Asked to comment on the role of talks-writers as gate-keepers of material worth publishing, Solohubenko, also insisted that

'[talk writers' analysis] was translated but it wasn't a centralised system. They were writing what they thought, and sometimes there weren't even a second pair of eyes to check it. We [journalists in language sections] weren't told to translate talkwriters' material, you choose to do it; [the material] included also packages such as illustrated pieces, little "featurettes", etc. (Solohubenko, 2009).

Former talks-writer Dave Page who worked in the BBC Eastern Services broadly confirms

But I think that even in those days, it was a partnership between the people who worked in the [language] sections, who had an enormous knowledge of the culture and politics of those countries and nothing really went out until it had gone through that particular filter...even though we were in the topical unit, being British and writing about these things, I think we felt that a lot of things that we were writing was a kind of distillation of the knowledge in the Eastern service (Page, 2009).

While editorial decisions were officially made top-down, informal exchanges in Bush House lifts, at tea breaks, and at the famous canteen and at the BBC Club softened the Fordist contours by an institutional culture of respect, collegiality and comradeship.

The very important thing was that across [different language] services there were extraordinary linkages and friendships and commitment to common professional standards, which was not just shown in broadcasting but in relationships, in the club, in the talking about programs, the creative process of broadcasting which was so very important...Linking these services together and in creating a common purpose amongst people, a professional purpose (Page 2009).

These contrasting accounts suggest that the 'factory' approach was not uniform or absolute. All three modalities, including dialogue and network, were concurrent and interactive. Surprisingly, various forms of an equally non-hierarchical dialogue with audiences were tried very early on in some language services which took the form of phone-ins or audience feedback re-broadcast to all users. Such incipiently dialogical models of communication persist - thus another reason not to periodize - and they have seen an exponential growth in genres and approaches. The BBC learned to listen, as well as broadcast.

Translation as a Dialogic Engagement

This second metaphor draws on work integrating cultural semiotics into the study of journalistic practice, building upon, but also developing Lotman (1990), especially Born (2004) and Cronin (2005). The work of Lotman was so influential because it

reframed the understanding of translation, moving it away from a narrowly linguistic focus on texts and towards cultural contextualisation. Translation came to be understood as implicated in the complex intertwined processes of communication and signification between the internal organisation of a text and external, syntactically related signs and structure – contexts (Bassnett, 2002). The importance of active reception by a target audience was additionally identified as a key element. By virtue of its constant need for selection, data-processing through relativizing interpretation, and thus asymmetrical transformation, translation was recognized as creation (Bellos, 2009). In this perspective, cultural relevance, clarity and usefulness for audiences take precedence over linguistic equivalence. In journalistic practice, this was nothing new, but it was increased by local partnerships and re-broadcasting arrangements from the early 1990s. Twenty years later, Mustafa (2009) could report in a Witness Seminar: 'I am happy to report that we are no longer a translation factory. In fact I would say that 90 per cent of our output is original, whether we report Bangladesh or India or even global stories.'

Local partnerships and re-broadcasting arrangements, along with new FM-quality spectrums available in target areas, have created a much closer link with audiences. This was the moment when 'the priorities shifted...it was not good enough to broadcast global news for global audience but we [at the BBC] had now local audiences listening to us on FM, so it was impossible to ignore regional or national stories in those countries' (Solohubenko, 2009). Modified work-floor arrangements, too, moved the emphasis away from translators to de-centralized broadcasting staff with strong production powers and editorial skills. Many of the translators working at the time were re-trained as journalists, which was good for the BBC World Service: 'The BBC thought it was becoming worthy, but an old lady rather than a young partner; it was important to keep up with modern developments in each particular market and language' (Solohubenko, 2009). Sinha added: 'When I'm re-versioning a story from English, I'm not translating it, but creating a new story that would make sense to Hindi-speaking audience. I think journalists have better knowledge and reflect [cultural nuances] better. They are not linguists, they wouldn't get it 100% right, but they would write it in a way that makes sense to their audiences. This is translation that has soul. When I read a piece I should think it was written in Hindi and not translated' (Sinha, 2006).

Such 'translation with soul' articulates the complex process dubbed 'trans-editing' (Cheesman and Nohl 2010, in this Special Issue). When the seasoned journalist Ryszard Kapuściński (2005) was given time to meditate on the process of translating, he wrote that 'translating is transposing' (see Baumann and Gillespie, in this Special Issue).

As an analytical tool, 'dialogue' emphasises the vital interconnections between content producers and content users, with clear implications for quality control, sociocultural relevance, and communicative engagement with audiences who are invited to interact. This dynamic system of interactivity and dialogue can be realised even further in the current times of networked communication.

Translation as networked communication

The network metaphor rightly evokes the rhizome architecture of the Internet , no longer a top-down hierarchical classification and beyond the patronizing mode of 'dialogue with the [passive] audience'. The rhizome modality of communication stresses multiple nodes, positioned in near-unpredictable nodes positioned on a variety of scales, and digitally-enabled connectivity between globally dispersed populations (Deuze, 2007: 17). It captures the changing nature of journalism, and it invites divergent audiences to participate not only in the shared consumption of pre-manufactured content (the Fordist 'translation factory') or to be content with bottom-up 'dialogue' with the producer. As Pete Myers, formerly of the BBC World Service and later at Radio Netherlands Worldwide (RNW), observed in a useful historical sweep:

Many international broadcasters started [...] by first of all having technical facilities such as transmitters [so that they could] reach people, but nobody really sat down with the serious question "OK, but what's the message to these people and what's the best mix [...] for reaching these people?" (Myers, 2007)

Backed up by editorial blueprints (BBC, 2005), cross-media and interactive experimentation was introduced to allow for a more tailored and participatory

audience strategy. The BBCWS continues to serve traditional and especially 'crisis' audiences in media-poor or developing countries through short-wave radio and selective partnerships with local stations. But it has started to recognise the importance of the 'digital audience', constituted of people connected by shared interests rather than necessarily a shared linguistic identity. These are speakers of a particular language, no longer confined to a country but perhaps diasporic or travelling publics (Solohubenko, 2009). In addition, if it is increasingly the message, as Cronin argues, that defines the medium through which the content is delivered and consumed by fragmented, differentiated audiences, then 'the role of translation in this new media will be to follow the differentiated specificity of the message rather than the globalising thrust of McLuhan's media' (Cronin, 2005: 114). The digital explosion has certainly seen a proliferation of web-based communication in LOTE, but translation is necessary to harness the Internet's potential to facilitate 'a global as articulated by Ethan Zuckermann, co-founder of the multilingual conversation' 'citizen-journalism' website (Global Voices) in 2009. The Interactive Editor at World Service Future Media, Santosh Sinha (2009), observes that multilingualism has become a primary rather than peripheral practice. BBC online sites, for example, are often linked or derived from the radio language programs, while the radio programs often invite audience phone-ins, email or text messages. A theme that originates within one language program on the radio can be translated and made available online to reach a wider audience. Alternatively, different language services are commissioned to simultaneously produce content of global relevance and then share it across languages, often broadcast on both Internet and radio (see Cheesman and Nohl's [this issue] discussion of globalising and localising processes). For example, some content on the BBC's online forum site 'Have Your Say' originates from the BBC World Service language services, and is translated into English to reach more audiences (Herbert and Black, 2007).

Multilingual debates have been an important part of the BBC's translation practices. After the topic and key questions for a debate are decided at the Weekly Interactivity meetings, users of each language site are invited to contribute. A selection of approximately ten arguments offering a representative sample of audience opinion is then collated and also shared with other languages. These debates give the BBC WS user an opportunity to access a transnational rather than a purely national or regional public discourse, says Sinha:

"An average user is generally unable to access views from different languages and perspectives. By bringing these languages together, the BBC audiences are given an opportunity to compare and contrast different views. They think 'hang on, I'm familiar with some of the comments but the others – although different – make sense as well.' For a user it informs their perspective on an issue, and different views can take debate forward" (Sinha, 2006).

A Message Board which allows aggregation of users' comments on a given topic provides an alternative form of new media experimentation. Both registered and unregistered users can take part, but, in what is called "reactive moderation", only registered users' comments get published straight away on a post-moderated debate. The contribution of unregistered users must first be read and approved by a BBC journalist, as per the House Rules published on the BBC World Service websites. The question as to whether participating audiences realise and care if their contributions are selectively edited raises an important issue of editorial responsibility and communication rights that warrants further research. Journalists do not spend inappropriate time or energy editing or improving the quality of users' comments, even if they are not perfectly 'articulate or crisp in their argument' (Sinha, 2009). The responsibility for managing the tone and quality interaction is partly relegated to users through a system of voting for best comments. Both registered and unregistered users can also alert a journalist about violations of rules, because, as Sinha explained: 'You expect people to be reasonable if they engage regularly, and value the site as a sensible place for debate. If the moderation is left to users, more people will come to the online community' (Sinha, 2009).

A reasonable debate - that is, one according to the BBC World Service's framework of rules - does not necessarily need to present a 50/50 balance of views for and against; but it can skew in one direction or the other. The BBC hosts and aggregates the opinions, but the debate ceases to be an original piece of BBC journalism (Sinha, 2009). Users are able to comment on stories but also to submit their own multimedia material, using a simple content uploader system that allows for the sending of photos, audio or video to the BBC at the click of a button. The user-generated content received directly from people on the ground saves resources and can overcome information gaps that could not otherwise be bridged. During the 2009 Iran protests, for instance, users' contributions were a valuable source of information world-wide. The journalist's role is to sift through the content and decide which material to publish based on authenticity criteria and BBC editorial guidelines, the so-called 'Taste and Decency principle'.

The emergent curatorial role of the World Service as content aggregator, providing a mediated space for international publics to interact and debate, has extended into its use of social media (e.g. Twitter for the coverage of the 2009 Iranian demonstrations). Emergent trends involve also a gradual migration away from the BBC site via social bookmarking, which allows the BBC content to be distributed through platforms such as Facebook or Digg, without users needing to visit the BBC site. Participatory and collaborative possibilities enabled by these new technologies constitute a distributed and networked model of communication, very different to the centralised structure and architecture of traditional mass media. And yet, Roberts (2009) is right to caution against the overly celebratory accounts of public empowerment and liberation that flow from interactive media as a result of network communications. 'Allowing anyone to speak regardless of knowledge and expertise is a rather utopian and naïve understanding of the nature of political discourse or public conversation.' Posing the question: 'how meaningful is such a participation when its terms and vocabulary are decided elsewhere', Roberts argues that a meaningful participation must be more than technologically enabled; it must be linked to social and economic changes (Roberts, 2009).

Discussion and Conclusions

The three interrelated and co-existent frames of 'factory', 'dialogue' and 'network' describe evolving, but also cumulative logics of translation. The 'factory' model required and still needs not only a huge volume of translated news material, but also institutional hierarchies of editorial control over content production and distribution. Yet as demonstrated, a series of institutional and discursive negotiations underpinned the day-to-day engagement with audiences via content production, opening a scene for a more nuanced analysis of translation practices based on

'dialogue' and 'network'. Different language sections have long developed strong connections with their communities, providing audiences with much-needed factual information, not least at times of political upheavals or environmental crises. The widening into the 'dialogical' mode and the 'networked' mode has succeeded at least in numerical terms. In 2008, the broadcaster reached a weekly multimedia audience of around 188 million across its 32 language services – the highest audience figure ever (BBC, 2009a).

Yet appropriate and sensitive procedures of translation in globalising or localising news remain crucial (Cheesman and Nohl 2010, in this Special Issue). In a context of abundant communication platforms, careful attention to processes of mediation, quality control and effective communication are more important than ever. Audiences' perception of poor translation quality, so Gambier (2006: 12) argues, was the reason why the CNN websites in English and German failed to provide a corrective to narrowly conceived ideas about international content production and distribution, an observation that recalls Sinha's call, quoted above, for 'translation with soul.'

Although there has been a recognised shift towards original journalism in radio programming across language services over the past decades, translations of BBC English news are the main source of news generation for online LOTE services (BBC, 2009b). This is crucially a problem of limited resources. Some language services are so small that they cannot produce their own news, so resort to translating what is offered on the English-language pages. Perhaps popular multilingual sites such as online encyclopaedia *Wikipedia,* fan-generated translations of anime, manga, or of *Global Voices* news offer ideas about alternative mechanisms of knowledge production and quality control based on the principle of reciprocity and networked collaboration rather than the conventional centralised model of Fordist expert media.

The growing financial pressures have translated also into structural changes that have seen a number of language services being relocated away from Bush House. For example, Hindi online services moved to a bureau in Delhi, and a large portion of the Portuguese-language section is now based in Sao Paulo. This has reduced the critical mass at Bush House and harbours negative implications for the BBC World Service's work culture, as nostalgically recalled by many former Bush House staff former staff who built the broadcaster's reputation on journalistic professionalism and informal interlingual exchanges. Sinha concurs:

We run the risk of these languages feeling remote and unconnected with the other languages. If you are in Bush House, you naturally meet people from other language services and share ideas and content. The move of Arabic and Persian Services to Egton House has already affected their participation in some of our regular meetings. The thing that I enjoy the most in my role as Interactive Editor (Languages) is that I can go around Bush House and meet people who speak different languages, come from different places (Sinha, 2009).

The value of the physically-bounded and localised interpersonal interactions addressed by Sinha is an important corrective to technologically deterministic approaches to communication and collaboration in the digital culture, an argument echoed by Ang and Pothen (2009: 4-5).

International broadcasting with its long-standing multilingual expertise has a role to play in mobilising the Internet's capacity for a global conversation. The question how to make multilingual digital content intelligible to international audiences is reportedly a priority for the BBC. Institutional resources are pooled to translate this material in both English and other languages. There is now a pot of money for translation and innovation available at the World Service, to support horizontal and reciprocal translations right across language services. And synergize more extensive network effects (Benkler, 2006). The expansion of interactivity units across all language services, rather than just the initial five sites (Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Spanish, and Russian), is strategically motivated to engage with young audiences in particular, and to harness the acknowledged 'wealth of content' generated by each language service.

An increased participation from language services in content production could contribute to what Cronin (2005: 114) perceived as the role of translation in the new informational economy: 'the differentiated *specificity* of the message rather than the

globalising thrust of McLuhan's media'. A more multi-centric representation of complex arguments, using relevant local content in many languages and enhanced by the collaborative possibilities of new media, has much potential to engender a more intimate personalised connection with the BBC's world audiences. However, the 'networking' mode is not by definitions a site of civic empowerment It can as easily be a source of bias and propaganda, 'serving to exclude rather than include' (Livingstone, 2008). This resonates with Roberts' (2009) criticism of the notion that web-enabled communication is inherently liberating. As international broadcasters increase the volume of aggregated audience-created content, it seems important that they still provide independent editorial input as well. Rather than understanding regulation of content as an unwelcome legacy of a past 'factory era', perhaps it is useful to start paying closer attention to appropriate safeguarding measures and management systems available to mitigate ethnic or religious stereotyping or oversimplifications (Richter, 2008) in such an open-ended system.

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