

Cross-Cultural Communication in the 21st Century: The Implications of Translation and Transliteration

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Human development in the next millennium will bring changes and challenges in cross-cultural communication and understanding, which will demand more than current language conversion methods provide. As we stand at the threshold of the twenty-first century we are in a unique position to enjoy the benefits of freedom of accessibility to information enabled by advances of the information age. A technological infrastructure has been put in place, which facilitates a certain freedom of communication across previously impermeable boundaries, however, barriers to cross-cultural communication of language still exist today and will impede human development if they are not understood and breached. We need to reconceptualize transmission of language communication in a world, which is dramatically increasing the movement of people, goods, and information across cultural zones and national borders. (Weiss 321) Since all acts of communication are essentially acts of translation, we need to ensure that communication across cultural borders is as free of barriers as possible. (Center for Translation Studies Website)

Power and wealth is increasingly determined by one's ability to access and use the information available in cyberspace and via other media. Thus, language carries power but is also ambiguous. This ambiguity exists within any language, but in a cross-cultural transfer of meaning, which occurs during translation, it is even more crucial that this ambiguity be minimized. The transfer of the meaning of an idea to another person would occur most accurately through the use of a "pure language – which no longer means or expresses anything but is, as expressionless and creative Word, that which is meant in all languages" (Benjamin 80). But, since we are unable to perform this sort of direct thought transfer, we need to use the intermediate step of translation, which allows for corruption of the original meaning. For one thing, cultural subjectivity regulates what words and phrasing are used in the original so an understanding of the cultural from which a text emanates is essential for optimal understanding. Paz notes that the sun that is praised in an Aztec poem is not the sun of the Egyptian hymn because each language is a view of the world realized within a culture. (Paz 153)

Textual translations can give literal representations of words, however, the relationship between the content and language is quite different in the original and in the translation. The nucleus or heart of the meaning is best defined as "the element that does not lend itself to translation" (Benjamin 75). Within the limits of the possibility of translation, Derrida states that "translation practices the difference between signified and signifier" and he concludes that since translation is never pure therefore the notion of transformation needs to be substituted for that of translation. (Derrida lxxxvii) This may only be a matter of terminology, however, this distinction becomes clearer when we realize that during translation each word has underlying associations of meaning which have to be transferred intact into the cultural context of a new language. (Center for Translation Studies Website)

Music, in contrast to written language is a universal language, which requires no translation. Textual translation is unable to directly transfer meaning, but could be

equated with transposing a musical piece into another key. (Schopenhauer 33)
Language is not as universally understood as music or even art because true understanding of spoken and written languages requires a knowledge of the particular culture from which the work emerges. This venture is complicated further by the fact that all cultures are constantly evolving, and therefore their languages are also changing. This constant flux in language meaning makes the task of translation an even more difficult proposition than if language were static. As cultures reside in increasingly less static domains and border cultures evolve into an emerging “Fourth World”¹ the translation of languages and transliteration of scripts evolving from this resulting cultural hybridization will change the traditional concepts of reading across cultural borders. Idioms, creoles, dialects and pidgin languages make exact translation an even more complicated proposition and present additional barriers to cross-cultural communication.

Information transmission across national borders, as well as across more fluid linguistic borders, will demand a translation, which allows both the text and its meaning to be communicated as seamlessly as possible. Octavio Paz said that, “...the language that enables us to communicate with one another also encloses us in an invisible web of sounds and meanings, so that each nation is imprisoned by its language, a language further fragmented by historical eras, by social classes, by generations” (Paz 154). But, now and even more so in the next millennium, cultural and language borders will be increasingly unequal to the national borders. As these cultural border spaces expand and become the place where the action is taking place, there will be an even greater need to attempt to transfer the precise meaning of the texts originating from these new cultural realms with the least translation possible. as translation into another language, or transliteration of the written script necessarily alters the original meaning.

Language Choice

Of course we would eliminate translation if everyone spoke a common language. Will English become the default language of the world? English is increasingly becoming the lingua franca for the international community, something that has been accelerated by the fact that 80% of the world’s electronic databases and communications networks are in English. (Jandt 115) One common language would certainly eliminate the barriers presented by translation and transliteration of the 5000 or so diverse languages now spoken today, even taking into account that approximately half of these languages will become extinct in the next 50 years. (Altman 231) The linguistic loss of even one language would mean a loss of cultural diversity in the world and this sort of language loss would not happen easily even if this were a goal. In order to fight the current perceived trend towards one global language, the French government is now levying fines on English-only websites based in France. The French language-purity laws have resulted in forced Internet translation and resulted in lower Internet use in France. (Coleman 58)

There is currently a debate raging within decolonized nations about returning to the native language of their culture rather than using a colonially imposed language for publishing literature. Ngugi wa Thiong’o has been at the forefront of this

¹ Gomez-Peña defines the Fourth World as “a conceptual place where the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas meet with the deterritorialized peoples, the immigrants, and the exiles; it occupies portions of all of the previous worlds.”

movement and now only publishes his texts in Gikuyu, his native language. Of course, this brings up the question of who will be able to read his works. He is clearly producing them for his local audience, however, his fame has resulted in their being translated. The translation of his works into English for distribution in the English-speaking world will result in this population reading a one-off representation with potential differences of meaning.

Rather than evolving into a melting pot which would tend to result in everyone using English or another language as a language of wider communication, the next millennium should offer the opportunity for nations to retain their languages, vernacular scripts and culture and still participate in the international dialog. This goal is beneficial for humanity as a whole since the loss of even one language is the loss of history and tradition, and contributes to the erosion of multiculturalism.

Implications of Cyberspace

It may seem like a virtual borderless world community has resulted from the advances of computer communications, with cyberspace attempting to serve as a platform for global culture with its own emerging language, however, as long as we lack the keys to translation of the massive information available we will not be really be able to understand or order this information so that it will be useful. (Gomez-Peña 171) We have traditionally communicated across linguistic borders using the language conversion methods of translation, transliteration and transcription; methods commonly in use today, but which will be increasingly less necessary in order to solve the problems of language transmission resulting from the current limitations of communication software. There is software available now, which allows direct keying of vernacular scripts into word processing programs and increasingly into databases. Vernacular script is now commonly being used and transferred electronically without having to go through the often-confusing step of transference into romanized script, something which was necessary in order to accommodate the ASCII character set. Advances in communication software will increasingly allow transmission of original vernacular scripts without the need for the intermediate step of transliteration. The transmission of original scripts throughout cyberspace eliminates the possibility of ambiguity, which can easily occur, however, there is still a need for translation for those not able to understand the language of the original text or for those who do not have the appropriate compatible software.

Types of Language Conversion

Translation from words and phrases in one language to words and phrases in another language is a different proposition than that of attempting to encode the characters in one language in a different script than the original vernacular script of the source language. The conversion of writing which involves translating a script, letter for letter, into another script is called transliteration. If the target script uses the Latin alphabet, the narrower term, Romanization, can also be used. Most alphabets were developed for one language and can only accurately render the phonemes of that language, however, the need arose to encode the language in a different alphabet because people and computers couldn't understand or transmit the original vernacular alphabet. There is also the language conversion method of transcription, which involves translating the sounds of the spoken language into a phonetically intelligible inscription, something that you may recognize from having used a Berlitz phrase guide which may advise you to say "mehrsee boakoo" in order to make the

corresponding sounds for the French “merci beaucoup”. (Berlitz 11) This is not used as a method of transferring language cultures but rather as an artificial method of teaching pronunciation of foreign words.

Barriers Inherent in Script Conversion

Should a language be written in its own script? This question would not have to be posed if we understood all languages and could read all of the ways the words are symbolized as scripts. Since this is not true, especially in the Western world, where computerized transmission of language began, transliteration and transcription schemes were developed which allow a foreigner to read or pronounce a series of romanized letters and come out with the same sounds as if she were reading the script or ideograph directly. This ideal conversion had problems for various reasons. First many contrasting and often contradictory transliteration schemes were used. One had to know the scheme and how to decode it in order to read it. Secondly, many transliteration schemes were not reversible, so confusion developed when trying to unencode the transliterated words. Consequently, the ultimate perfect reversibility happens rarely. Figure 1 display both of these potential problems.

The uniqueness of a personal name can be confusing especially when one is researching a particular author with a potentially confusing name. Figure 1 shows some of the possible transliterations for two rather well known names, Qaddafi and Naguib Mahfouz. If it were not for the complex syndetic structure of see-references, which do lead us to the one “authorized” transliteration form we might never find these authors’ works. If you happen to type in a version that is a cross-reference, you will be led to the authorized transliteration and consequently to all of the author’s collocated works. Now imagine that we were searching using the Arabic script; there would be very little confusion, unlike that which results from a romanized alphabetic search for a name like Qaddafi.

Completed bibliographic records for Arabic material in the Library of The American University in Cairo contain both transliterated and Arabic script entries for the author, title and name subject headings. These fields can be searched in either Arabic script or using transliteration. The next step, which is under development at the Library of Congress is the addition of the vernacular script form to the authority record. This would collocate all of the author’s works, both those written in English and those written in Arabic, by doing just one search using Arabic script.

The impact of these transliteration problems has been lessened since most Anglo-American libraries using transliteration in the bibliographic records in their on-line databases now use the standardized ALA/LC (American Library Association/ Library of Congress) transliteration tables. As long as it is deemed necessary to use transliteration in the transmission of information; a standardized, reversible transliteration scheme like this should be used.

The omission of diacritics and vowel markers adds another barrier to the cross-cultural retention of meaning. These marks are often stripped from or not even originally entered when the inputting is done because of the inability of software to accommodate them. Many software developers seem to be unaware of the importance of these marks, especially in predominantly English speaking areas where diacritics are not commonly used and their importance is not understood. The stripping of diacritics and special characters from bibliographic catalog records makes the text ambiguous, “sometimes to an outrageous extent” (Riedlmayer 32). See

Figure 2 for examples of problems of representation which arise when diacritics are not included in electronic texts.

We can see some of the potential problems arising from attempting to convert scripts in order to transmit this information in cyberspace. We have now come to the next stage where scripts do not necessarily need to be romanized in order to fit into ASCII character sets, for example. New, more sophisticated character sets have now been developed which will allow transmission of vernacular scripts. The International Standards Organization (ISO), the Arab Organization for Standardization and Metrology (ASMO) and Microsoft, to name a few, all offer character sets for separate scripts such as Arabic. The barrier that is facing us now is the non-compatibility amongst these standards, and the time and money that may have to be spent in converting between sets. The Unicode Standard provides a universal answer for this problem. The Unicode Standard is a 16-bit encoding standard that enables worldwide distribution of applications and provides for the internationalization of software since it incorporates all known scripts in its massive character set. (Aliprand 95) As this universal character is increasingly used to encode and transfer and transfer scripts, the problems of transliteration will disappear since original vernacular scripts will be more universally used. This will provide for a more seamless transmission of information and reduce the margin of error, which a conversion method such as transliteration allows.

Conclusion

The implications of cross-cultural transmission of language are many and will grow in the future as the world becomes more “wired”. We need to ensure that language conversion methods alter the original meaning of the text as little as possible. Walter Benjamin has stated that, “All the great texts contain their potential translation between the lines” and if this is true the task of the translator is daunting. (Benjamin 82) However, it provides us with a worthy challenge for the 21st Century, the effort to ensure that minimal meaning is “lost in translation”.

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