Lori Saint-Martin

Professor of literary studies at the Université du Québec à Montréal, Lori Saint-Martin is an essayist, novelist, conference interpreter and literary translator. She recently published *Un bien nécessaire, éloge de la traduction littéraire* (A Necessary Good, in Praise of Literary Translation) (2022).

Do translators need to resemble the authors they translate?

To render an author's voice with justice. That is the role of the translator. But does this representative task demand a certain resemblance with the author? If so, to what extent? While the issue is not a new one, it recently became subject to heated debate. Other than fueling discussions between propagators of universalism and defenders of diversity, it raised the complex question of legitimacy in translation.

As the conjunction of at least two languages and two cultures, translation and diversity are inseparable. Translation remains a profound experience of otherness, even when the person translated is culturally similar to us. Many translators, after having fallen in love with a book written by someone 'racially' and culturally very different from themselves, have looked for a publisher willing to take on that author's text in the new language. This is one reason why many of them were upset by the 2021 controversy over the translation of a poem by Amanda Gorman.

Let us briefly recall the facts: when the Dutch publishing house Meulenhoff announced the choice of Marieke Lucas Rijneveld – a young non-binary person who had just won the International Booker Prize with their first novel – to translate *The Hill We Climb*, the poem read by Amanda Gorman at US President Joe Biden's inauguration ceremony, a journalist, Janice Deul, asked why the publisher had not rather chosen a young black woman instead. Rijneveld quickly announced they were withdrawing from the project, while many outraged literary figures demanded the right to translate, without restriction, people very different from themselves.

These protests – which were predictable and, in a sense, understandable (albeit not very nuanced) – quickly nipped the debate in the bud. However, I personally believe that the question is highly complex. Neither the rhetoric of rights ('I have the right to translate whoever I want'), nor the language of identity diktats ('only a young black female poet should translate another young black female poet') is able to provide a definitive answer.

For some people, to ask the question, 'who can translate whom?' is to play politics at the expense of literature. But they make it sound as if the world of translation is perfectly fair and harmonious, or rather was, until the wolf of diversity entered the fold. But this is not true – the publishing world, which includes the world of translation, is riddled with power struggles that the Amanda Gorman affair at least had the distinction of bringing out of the shadows: gender relations, 'race' and class relations, geopolitical relations.

> **"Translation shakes us up, it shifts the centre and disturbs the dominant ideology**

An illusion of diversity

The abundance of translations among the 'new titles' on display in bookshops gives us the false impression of having access to works from all over the world, when, on closer inspection, the 'diversity' of this world is really rather uniform – a few languages, a few countries, an international elite, some dominant individuals. Until very recently, the history of translation has been one of white privileged males translating one another or being translated by women.

As in the past, translation today is entangled with relations of domination between North and South, between 'races', languages and cultures, whether hegemonic or not. Racialized women authors from across the border who reach us in translation generally belong to a globalized elite writing in the language of the former colonizer (English, Dutch, French, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, etc.), published in New York, in London,

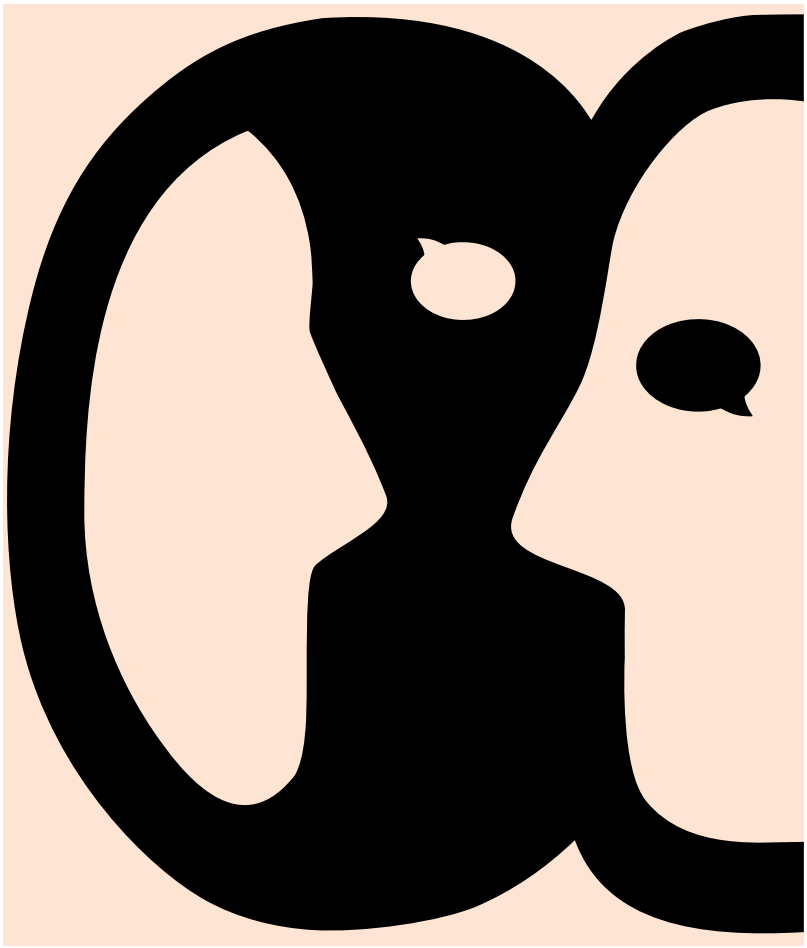

Illustration: © Agnieszka Ziemiszewska for *The UNESCO Courier*

in Paris. For every Indian woman author translated from Hindi, Marathi, or Malayalam, for example, there are dozens, if not hundreds, translated from English. Even within a minority, oppressed or marginalized, complex hierarchies emerge. While a black American woman writer may experience racism at home, abroad she benefits from the global hegemony of her country. She is far more likely to be translated and disseminated internationally than a black woman who lives on the African continent and writes in, say, Wolof. To be lent cultural capital, you must already possess it.

Although it is difficult to obtain aggregate statistics, it appears that men are translated more than women. At the height of the Latin American boom, almost no women writers were being translated, and a generation of important women authors (Cristina Peri Rossi, Luisa Valenzuela, Elena Garro, Silvina Ocampo) remained in obscurity. Between 2011 and 2019, around 26 per cent of the fiction or poetry translated in the United States was written by women.

I can already hear the apostles of the 'great universal literature' (a notion manufactured and maintained by those who dominate) declaring that it is the best writing that should be distributed in the world. But who makes the editorial choices, if not those who are already dominant? What the apostles of absolute freedom for translators often forget to mention is precisely just how white the translation community is. In the United States, a study conducted by the Authors Guild in 2017 found that 83 per cent of working translators were white and 1.5 per cent were black or African-American.

Breaking out of self-segregation

The profession therefore needs to open itself to new and more diverse translators, instead of remaining the preserve of white people. Much has been said about the importance of role models for discriminated groups – if people 'like you' have never written, you will find it hard to imagine yourself as a writer. Similarly, if the vast majority of translators are white and middle class, how can a person of diversity imagine getting into the field?

That said, affinities are not always based on identity – they can be based on style, voice, or subject. Other deep points of connection can create the energy needed for translation. One of my works of fiction was translated into English by a person from Québec much younger than me, and into Spanish by an Argentinian man who was slightly older. I never thought they were disqualified by being men or different to me in other ways.

The Franco-Congolese novelist, Alain Mabanckou, has an amusing saying about choosing a translator – "For me, it doesn't matter what colour the cat is, so long as it catches the mouse." Others might find the cat's pedigree fundamental. Some people from dominated or marginalized groups prefer to be translated by someone like them, while others will be happy to accept someone 'non-diverse'.

In the next few years – and it is still in its infancy – we will witness the emergence of translators from minority or marginalized groups and backgrounds. But as competence is not *only* based on identity variables, we should avoid confining people to 'their' group, unless they prefer to devote themselves to it exclusively.

Finally, let us return to the 'case' of Amanda Gorman. Without saying that no white person would ever have been able to translate her well, I do believe that – in this emblematic and highly mediatized case – the choice of a young female black translator would not only have been a magnificent symbolic and political gesture, but also a gesture of support for diversity.

More generally, partly out of concern for social equity, it is important to translate less privileged and more diverse writers. To allow other voices, stifled by the barely revised colonialism of the past, masquerading as globalization, to be heard.

We translate (and we read translations) so as not to find ourselves in an artificial, violent 'self-segregation' created by erasure and exclusion. Translation shakes us up, shows us that we are not the centre of the world. It shifts the centre and disturbs the dominant ideology. At its best, it is diversity itself, the world, *worlds*, at our fingertips. ■

Daliri Oropeza
Journalist based in Mexico

In Mexico, drawings to translate words

Published in 2021, the book *Intraducibles* (Untranslatables) illustrates a series of words from indigenous languages without equivalents in Spanish.

In January 2022, employees of a hotel in Tulum, a tourist resort on the Yucatan Peninsula, demonstrated in the streets of the town. Their demands? To obtain the recognition of their social rights and to protest the rule forbidding them to speak their language, Maya.

The event is not insignificant. With its sixty-eight indigenous languages, Mexico is one of the world's most linguistically diverse nations. But this rich diversity is eroding. It is partly because indigenous languages exist in many variants, meaning that speakers of the same language do not necessarily understand each other. The main reason for the decline, however, is the predominance of Spanish, which is used for all official, literary and educational purposes.

The work carried out through the book *Intraducibles* (Untranslatables) by Irma Pineda – a Didxazá-speaking Zapotec poet and representative of indigenous peoples to the United Nations – is situated in this context. Published in 2021, the book collects and illustrates sixty-eight words from thirty-three languages of Mexico's indigenous peoples that do not have a Spanish translation. Each word has a corresponding illustration that sheds light on its untranslatable nature.

Digging into the collective memory

"*Intraducibles* was born of a conversation I had with Gabriela Lavalle, director of the Mexican Cultural and Tourism Institute of Houston in the United States, about the book *Lost in translation* by Ella France Sanders, which lists untranslatable words in many languages", says Pineda. "In indigenous languages, there are also words that have to do with emotions, sensations and traditions, which are very difficult to capture in a single word in Spanish."

> **"With its sixty-eight indigenous languages, Mexico is one of the world's most linguistically diverse nations**

For example, the term *ndúyuu*, which in the Zapotec language refers to a body position one adopts to rest. In the book, it is illustrated by people in the fetal position. Other examples are *chuchumi*, which means "to stare into the void" in Akateko; *ke ndse'*, a ritual dedicated to the Earth that consists of placing stones in the river to ensure the health of a newborn child in Chatino; or *watsapu*, which refers to a special sheet used to wrap black bean tamales in Tutunakú.

The book, which was produced with the support of the National Institute of Indigenous Languages of Mexico, the Santillana publishing house and the UNESCO National Office in Mexico, was an opportunity to dig into the collective memory of the speakers. They were invited to investigate their own language to find words that had no equivalent in Spanish.

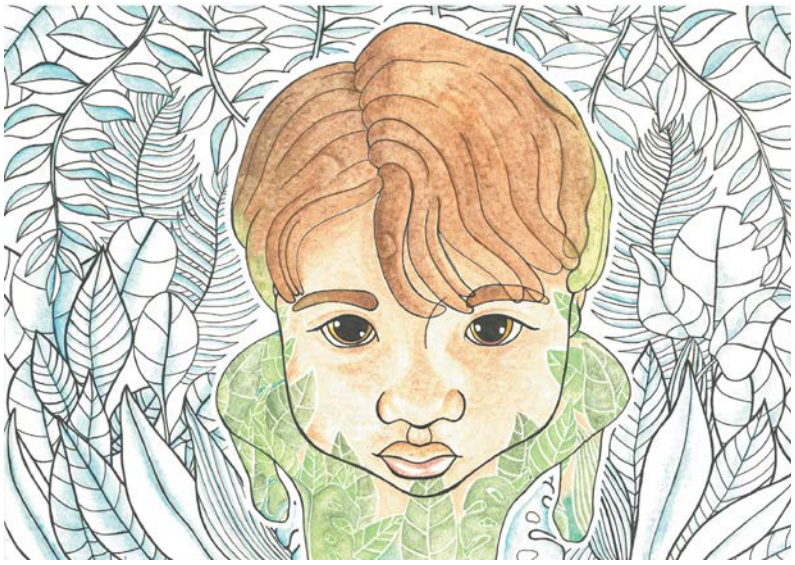

Illustration of the word chuchumi, *which means "to stare into the void" in Akateko.*

The idea is for these words, exhumed by elders, to find a place in everyday life. "The fact that people see their language, their words, reflected in a book, in written and illustrated form, gives meaning to and embellishes them. People reconnect with a word and regain the affection they have for their language," says Pineda.

Words from the heart

Young people have a key role to play in the revaluation and use of these languages. Some have already grasped this. For Érika Hernández, a young Nahua painter from the state of Morelos in central Mexico, Nahuatl is a language that carries a non-exclusive vision of the world, and does not differentiate between the sexes. "The feeling is different when I use certain words to describe nature or an emotion", she explains. "It's something very personal that comes from the heart and risks losing its meaning if you translate it."

Intraducibles succeeds in making tangible and reflecting the depth and meaning of several words, thus offering a more profound understanding of indigenous culture, from cuisine to ritual practices. By reading these words, we learn more about the ideas behind our food, our celebrations and our beliefs.

Many schools, especially in indigenous villages, have already ordered the book. Despite this success, Pineda regrets not having been able to find words in all sixty-eight of the existing languages. "Some languages have suffered a lot", explains the poet, who deplores the contempt in which indigenous languages are still held and the lack of knowledge that surrounds them. "But we cannot appreciate what we do not know", she concludes. ■

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◥ *The term* ndúyuu *which in the Zapotec language refers to a body position one adopts to rest.*

> **"Young people have a key role to play in the revaluation of indigenous languages**

An International Decade for Indigenous Languages (2022-2032)

While indigenous peoples make up only 5 per cent of the world's population, they speak the majority of its 7,000 languages – an estimated 6,000 languages.

According to the United Nations, more than 30 per cent of the world's languages are expected to disappear by the end of this century due to a lack of speakers, teaching, literature, transmission or political commitment. Not only does the loss of an indigenous language impoverish linguistic diversity, it also leads to an irremediable loss of traditional knowledge.

It is in attempting to halt this trend and safeguard this heritage that the United Nations has proclaimed 2022-2032 as the International Decade of Indigenous Languages. This Decade, led by UNESCO in cooperation with the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs and other relevant UN Agencies, is designated to draw attention to the critical loss of indigenous languages and the need to preserve, revitalize and promote them, including as vehicles of education.

The Los Pinos Declaration, endorsed in February 2020 in Mexico City upon the impetus of Mexico, and a Global Action Plan, presented in 2021, foster the implementation of concrete global action to preserve indigenous languages.

Barbara Cassin

Philologist, Hellenist and philosopher, member of the French Academy and a founding member of the International Network of Women Philosophers sponsored by UNESCO, Barbara Cassin has published numerous books, including *Éloge de la traduction* (In praise of translation), published in 2016. She edited the *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, first published in French in 2004.

Barbara Cassin: "We must resist the globalization of languages"

Each language carries a singular vision of the world, explains French philosopher Barbara Cassin, who defines translation as a know-how for dealing with differences.

Interview by Agnès Bardon

UNESCO

A question of definition to begin with – what is translation?

To translate means to lead through, to provide passage from one language to another. The exhibition I did in 2016 at the Mucem (Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilizations) in Marseille, titled 'Après Babel, traduire' (After Babel, translate), opened with the different ways of saying 'translate'. To translate comes from the Latin, *traducere*, not from ancient Greek, which had no equivalent and used another word: *hermêneuein*, which means 'to interpret'. In Arabic, the word 'translate' also means to interpret. In Chinese, ancient texts refer to translation as the act of turning over an embroidered piece of silk – the back side is not the same as the front side, and yet it is the same thing. This is a beautiful metaphor. To translate is to turn one thing into another, the two being so close that, as the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges says, it is the original that tries to resemble the translation.

Each language has its own strength and consistency, what we sometimes call its 'genius'. We have to imagine that something more than a simple change of clothes takes place in this process, contrary to what Plato describes in *Cratylus*. It is a change of personality that occurs. So to translate is to put the foreign into what is ours and to change both. It is, to use a beautiful expression of the twelfth-century Occitan troubadour Jaufré Rudel, "that inn afar".

Can one think in several languages?

When we think in one language, we necessarily think in several languages, that is, in comparison with other languages. In ancient Greece, translation was not a question because it was considered that there was only one language; the *logos* was at the same time reason, ability to speak (*ratio et oratio,* translated in Latin) and language – the Greek language. For the Greeks, the *logos* is universal, it defines humanity. But then those who do not speak Greek are 'barbarians', an onomatopoeia like *blah blah blah*, to designate the one who is not understood, who does not speak like me, and who is perhaps not a person like me.

To think in my language, I need to think in other languages as well. When I say '*bonjour*' in French, I don't say '*salaam*' or '*shalom*'. Unlike in Arabic and Hebrew, I don't wish you peace but just a good day. Nor do I wish you, like the ancient Greeks, *khaîre*, to rejoice, to enjoy. I do not wish you, like in Latin, *salve*, to be well. I am simply opening the day. Each language thus involves a vision of the world.

But we must add immediately that each language is by definition mixed – there is no racial purity of language. Words, like thoughts, are in evolution, they are imported, exported, digested. Each language is a process, an energy, not a closed work. Languages never stop interacting.

> **"Each language is a process, an energy, not a closed work**

In 2004 you edited the* Dictionary of Untranslatables. *What exactly do you mean by 'untranslatable'?

My interest in the untranslatable came from the practice of translating pre-Socratic thinkers. Since the syntax and semantics of Greek are not those of French, there are always several possible translations. The *Dictionary of Untranslatables* testifies to the fact that, even in philosophy, we speak and think in words – that is, in languages – and there is no overarching universal. When I say 'mind' in English, I do not quite say *Geist* in German and I don't quite say *esprit*. Depending on whether one translates Hegel's work entitled *Phénoménologie de l'esprit* in French as *Phenomenology of the Mind* or *Phenomenology of the Spirit* in English, the result is two completely different books.

The untranslatable is not the ambiguous. Certainly, in the *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, many terms are ambiguous in one language compared to another. For example, the word *pravda* in Russian does not mean only 'truth'. Above all it means 'justice'. There is another word for truth in the sense of accuracy: *istina*. So, in Russian, our French word '*vérité*' ('truth') is ambiguous. If you start from French, it is the word *pravda* that →

is ambiguous. It is always in relation to a point of view. Homonymy is one of the difficulties most full of meaning when we are translating.

What interests me is the discordance between languages, their non-equivalence, semantic but also syntactic and grammatical. The untranslatable is not what we cannot translate – we can translate anything – but what we never stop (not) translating. Translation is a movement. The philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt said that he had never encountered language, only languages – a 'pantheon', not a church.

> **With 'globish', the languages of culture, including English, find themselves in the position of dialects**

Translating also means choosing. One translates some texts rather than others and into some languages rather than others. Is translation therefore also a reflection of relationships of domination?

Language is a political issue par excellence. This has always been the case. The way the Greeks defined *logos* was obviously also political, and as for the *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, it is conceived as a war machine against two dangers threatening Europe. The first is a linguistic 'nationalism' that establishes a hierarchy between languages, with Greek and German at the top as 'authentic' languages. The second danger is that of 'globish', global English, which is supposed to be everyone's language. But speaking is not just communicating. Globish is the poorest of languages, the language of expert reports and dossiers. The languages of culture, including English, which are created by authors and works, written or oral, find themselves in the position of dialects, to be spoken at home.

We must resist this leveling globalization of languages. When I was at the The French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS), I refused to allow the researchers under my responsibility to write directly in English. I asked them to write in French and to have their work translated into good English.

The diversity of languages is undoubtedly an asset, but how can we manage to establish common ground from this diversity?

To achieve this, we must reflect on the differences. We must give ourselves the means to understand what we do not understand. This is one of the reasons why we founded an association called Maisons de la sagesse – Traduire (Houses of Wisdom – Translate). One of its main purposes is to establish glossaries of French administration terminology in order to help those who arrive on French soil and those who welcome them. Nothing can be less simple than giving one's name, first name and date of birth. When, for example, a Malian has the name of a hunter or warrior, his wife cannot bear his name, which poses a whole series of problems with the administration. And how do you give a date of birth when you come from a country that does not have the same calendar? The issues that newcomers face are loaded with centuries of French bureaucracy. We try to explain this in these glossaries, in which we give each other injections of culture. If translation is so important, it is because it is a know-how for dealing with differences. ■

Illustration: © Sylvie Serprix for *The UNESCO Courier*

Nick Dall

Journalist based in Cape Town, South Africa. He has co-authored two books on South African history: *Rogues' Gallery* and *Spoilt Ballots*.

Putting African science in the dictionary

Many technical terms do not have an equivalent in African languages, depriving parts of the population of scientific knowledge and its impact in society. Researchers and experts from the entire continent have decided to do something about this by enriching the vocabulary of several languages.

For South African science journalist Sibusiso Biyela, writing about a new dinosaur discovery in his home language Zulu should have been an easy task. But when he sat down to write the piece, as he told the British journal *Nature*'s podcast, he found that he "didn't have the words for relatively simple scientific terms like 'fossil' or even 'dinosaur'." Biyela remembers being extremely discouraged.

Another journalist might have taken the easy way out and 'Zulufied' the English words by adding an 'i' to the beginning, but Biyela felt uncomfortable with this approach. He ended up translating 'dinosaur' as *Isilwane sasemandulo* or 'ancient animal'. When it came to 'fossils', he took things even more literally, translating them as *Amathambo amadala atholakala emhlabathini* meaning "old bones found in the ground".

> **"Not having the words to discuss certain topics is a problem faced by people across Africa**

This was by no means the only time Biyela had encountered such problems. Not having the words to discuss even mildly technical topics is a problem people across Africa face every day. Linguistically, the continent, which has an estimated 2,000 indigenous languages, has been bypassed by science and many other spheres.

Constructing together

In 2019, a group of researchers from across the continent formed Masakhane ('we build together' in Zulu). This grassroots non-profit organization is "focused on developing language technology for African languages", explains co-founder Jade Abbott, an expert in natural language processing (NLP). Initially the group was made up primarily of machine learning experts, but it has since grown to include linguists, engineers, political scientists and communicators like Biyela. Being scattered across more than forty countries, these experts have developed the habit of working online. So when the Covid-19 pandemic struck, they were prepared.

At the start, Masakhane focused on developing machine translation tools for as many African languages as possible. Today many of us take tools like Google Translate for granted and we assume that any web page we access can automatically be translated into our home language. But to this day, speakers of only a handful of Africa's over 2,000 languages have access to such a luxury.

It is relatively easy to build machine translation tools, provided they have access to data – something which is sorely lacking for the vast majority of African languages. For this reason the Masakhane team focused on showing that "working in a participatory manner, with humans who understand the tools and the languages, enables you to get better data", says Jade Abbott.

A paper published in 2020, co-authored by fifty members of Masakhane in dozens of countries, won the Wikimedia Foundation Research Award. Examining the status quo for forty-eight of Africa's most spoken languages, it provided a roadmap for establishing "machine translation benchmarks for over thirty languages" while also enabling people "without formal training to make a unique scientific contribution."

Igbo, Swahili or Yoruba

Once this initial research phase was complete, Masakhane set about putting the theory into action. Their translation tool currently has working prototypes for six African languages (Igbo, Lingala, Shona, Swahili, Tshiluba and Yoruba). Abbott expects it to be a work in progress for several years. The team will also be exploring how to best make this tool

accessible, as everyone involved is very keen "to make sure that the tools are used to improve communities in Africa rather than boosting profits for digital platforms".

Masakhane's members have produced over 200 academic papers and the organization has sanctioned seven other major projects. One of these, *Decolonise Science*, a collaboration with AfricaArxiv, an African digital archive working towards building an open scholarly repository, and ScienceLink, an open access scientific platform based in the Netherlands, in which Biyela, the Zulu journalist, is heavily involved.

When the project kicked off in 2021, the initial goal was to translate around 200 scientific papers into six African languages. But the team soon realised that this was a nearly impossible task which would require the creation of hundreds of new terms ('dinosaur', 'fossil', etc) for each paper. A more realistic, revised goal will see the group translate the abstracts of 180 papers (which have already been selected via an intensive process that considers the field, impact, and geographic and gender diversity of the research) into the six languages while also generating five new terms for each paper.

> **"The lack of data in African languages is hampering the development of machine translation tools**

If 'decolonisation' sounds like a destructive process of tearing down existing edifices, for Masakhane it is more about building new ones. "What happens for a lot of speakers of indigenous languages," explains Biyela, "is that we can talk about sports and politics and other topics in our home language, but when it comes to talking about science or technology [we] have to code switch. [...] This can be problematic because it paints science as this foreign visitor that's invading the conversation", he adds. This situation is not without consequences, notably in the health domain. When facing people who are hesitant about getting vaccinated, for example, "you can't really explain what mRNA or immunology is in your home language." If Masakhane has their way this will all be changing very soon. ■

Illustration: © Francesc Roig for *The UNESCO Courier*

Roshanak Taghavi

Journalist based in Washington, DC.

Subtitling: Behind the scenes

If digital platforms have revolutionized the distribution of films and series in foreign languages, translators have hardly benefited from the public's enthusiasm for international content as the pressure on deadlines and wages increases.

"Once you overcome the one-inch-tall barrier of subtitles, you will be introduced to so many more amazing films", stated South Korean director Bong Joon-Ho at the Golden Globe awards in 2020. His film *Parasite* became the first non-English language film to win an Oscar for Best Picture, shining a spotlight on the critical role subtitles play in exposing global audiences to the vast world of film.

The international success of the film negated the widespread perception that English speakers are reluctant to read while watching televised content. Indeed, *Parasite*, which is now streaming on subscription-based platforms worldwide, grossed more than $50 million throughout the United States and Canada upon its cinema debut.

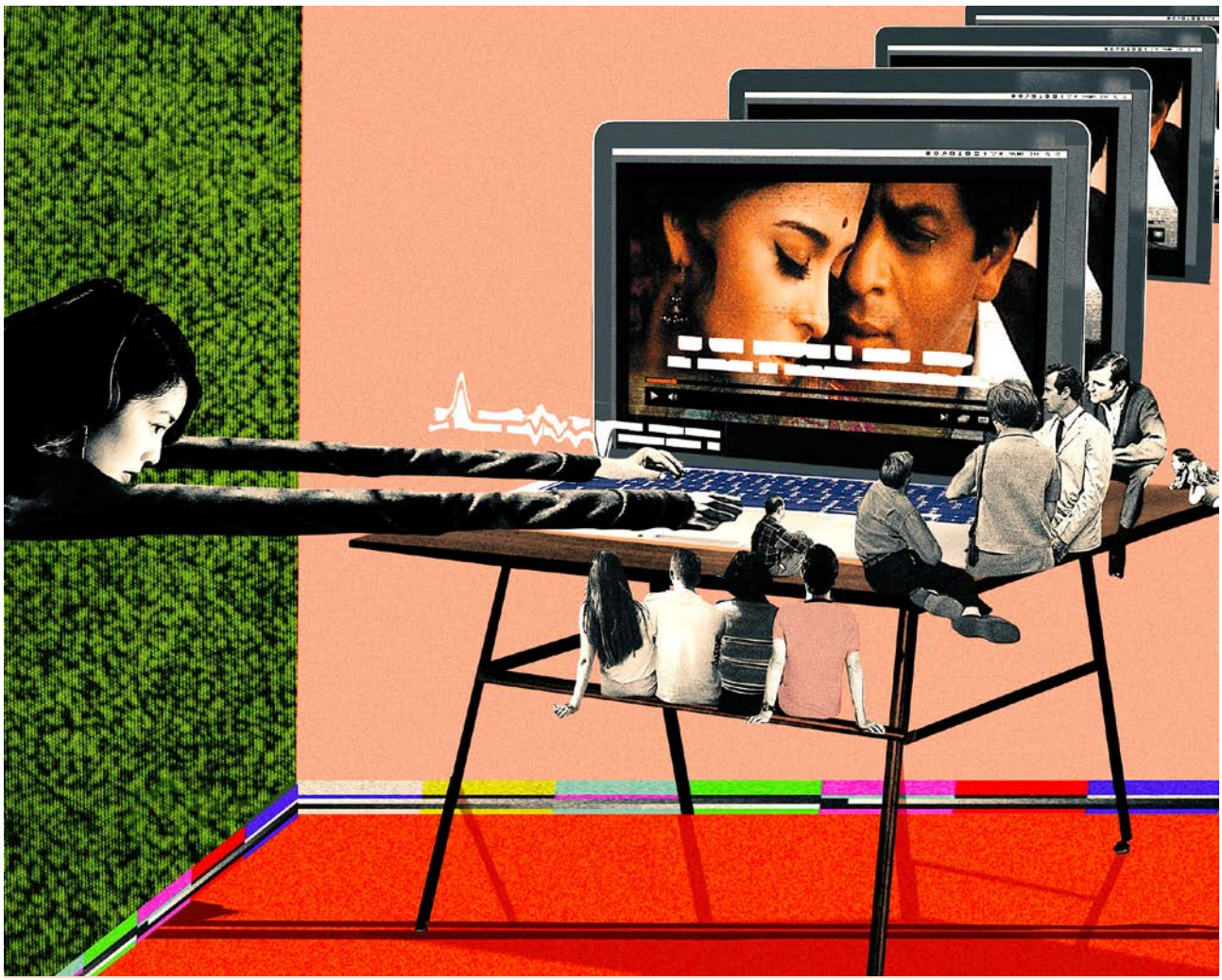


Illustration: © Nadia Diz Grana for *The UNESCO Courier*

The phenomenal success of subtitled films like *Parasite* or the South Korean series *Squid Game* has also brought to light the precarious situation of subtitlers. Do their poor working conditions explain the stark contrast in subtitle quality across shows and films for streaming platforms? This question has prompted debate among the public-at-large.

Unprecedented popularity

In a few years, subscription-based streaming platforms have revolutionized cross-border viewership of foreign-language films and television shows, with localized international content gaining unprecedented popularity among English-language audiences.

Roughly 36 per cent of Netflix subscribers are from the United States and Canada, with viewership of non-English content up 71 per cent since 2019, stated Bela Bajaria, Head of Netflix Global TV, at the Television Critics Association's summer press tour in 2021.

The American giant, which streams content in more than 190 countries, subtitled seven million run-time minutes in 2021, with plans to promote translations and make them even more compelling for subscribers, revealed Greg Peters, Chief Operations and Chief Product Officer at Netflix. The platform is largely considered by Language Service Providers (LSPs) to be a "pioneer" in setting subtitling and dubbing standards.

A vicious circle

Subtitlers, however, do not really profit from this growing popularity of foreign content. "We have this 'subtitling as an afterthought' type of model. Money for translation, subtitling, dubbing and access currently comes at the very end of the filmmaking process, when the film or television budget has largely been spent", says Pablo Romero-Fresco, Honorary Professor of Translation and Filmmaking at University of Roehampton in London.

While 50 per cent or more of most films' revenue is earned from their foreign translated versions, only 0.01 per cent to 0.1 per cent of budget is spent on them. "Is the color correction of a film that is going to be speaking to millions of viewers more important than its translation? It's a shocking disparity", Romero-Fresco says.

Subtitlers are generally paid per minute of content rather than per subtitle. According to subtitle translators, who prefer to remain anonymous, this per minute rate has been gradually falling over the past thirty years. Another issue is that there is no standardized process for assignments, contracts or payment, with rates and methods for contracting subtitling services varying vastly by country or region.

> **"In the United States and Canada, viewership of non-English content has increased by 71 per cent since 2019**

"Streaming platforms and content creators themselves are prepared to pay for quality subtitling", says Stavroula Sokoli, Vice President of the European Association for Studies in Screen Translation. However, these revenues need to reach the translators, which is not always the case. Sometimes streaming platforms give subtitling projects to Language Service Providers (LSPs) who in turn pass them on to smaller vendors. Even if the initial rate paid is high, it decreases as the number of intermediaries increases.

"If you're only working for vendors or clients who pay very badly, then you have to work all the time because you can't make ends meet", says a veteran French subtitler. "And if you work all the time, you can't have time to meet other [better-paying] clients. It can become a vicious circle."

The increasing pressure on deadlines and wages, is prompting some longtime subtitle translators to leave the industry. "In the past few years, streamers are expecting a lot more of the linguists: they expect higher quality, they give us a little bit less time, they pay us less than before or the same, even though the cost of living in the world has changed", says the head of a LSP, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Pragmatic deadlines

Many in the subtitling industry state that subtitling should be integrated in the budget at the start of the filmmaking process, so that a respectable payment rate is included and an appropropriate LSP is selected from the start. That vendor would in turn, have the appropriate funding and time to select a subtitler who is the right fit. Indeed, Bong Joon-Ho's *Parasite* was so phenomenally successful because he chose to work with a subtitle translator with particular experience, Darcy Paquet, to ensure the translation's appropriate context and nuance.

In the near-term, a solution could be for streaming platforms to collaborate with vendors to ensure consistency in subtitler payment and more pragmatic deadlines. This process has started in France, where subtitlers are paid per subtitle rather than per minute for certain films. Streaming platforms are also able to communicate more forcefully with vendors to pay better rates for translation.

"French film producers know that they have to export to countries that speak other languages, so most of the time, they will take that into account from the start", says Sabine de Andria, a Paris-based translator who has been subtitling for more than twenty years. "If globalization has one positive aspect, it is that it has really made obvious that subtitling and dubbing are essential and they need to be done well". ■

> **"Expenditure on translation and access typically accounts for 0.01 per cent to 0.1 per cent of a film's budget**

Joss Moorkens

Associate Professor at the School of Applied Language and Intercultural Studies as well as at the ADAPT Centre at Dublin City University, Ireland.

The translator, an endangered species?

Since the first public machine translation experiments in the 1950s, we have not stopped predicting the triumph of machine over human. Yet, more people work in the translation industry now than ever before. Having become very efficient and accessible to most people, online translation systems have not killed the profession – they have transformed it.

The first public machine translation experiment took place in 1954. Led by researchers from IBM and Georgetown University in Washington, DC, it was destined to make possible high-quality automatic translation from Russian into English in a few years. Since this first attempt, claims that machines could soon be replacing translators became usual. In 2018, Microsoft announced that their Chinese to English news translations were of comparable quality to human translation. The paradox however, is that although translation systems are accessible to most people, the number of people working in the translation industry is higher than ever before – an approximate 600,000 people in the world. In this context, do professionals really have a reason to worry?

In fact, the situation is more complex than it seems. Firstly because translators themselves use digital translation tools. Translators who work on repetitive or iterative texts are likely to use translation memory, a labour-saving tool for recycling translations of sentences identical or similar to those translated previously. Many translators use machine translation and edit the text generated by the machine. Some however, prefer not to use it as they find the job uninteresting and poorly remunerated.

There are, of course, texts that are machine translated without any human input. Since there is now more digital content produced than ever before, there are simply too few human translators to translate it all. In general, a common rule of thumb guiding the level of human input is that the automation should be appropriate for the shelf-life of a text, as well as the level of risk in terms of subsequent consequences resulting from errors. This means that the translation of an online travel review or a tweet can be automated, whereas printed materials, marketing or medical texts, for example, require more human oversight.

Dashed hopes

Since the early days of automation, there has been a tendency to overestimate output quality. The hopes placed on machine translation in 1954 were let down, and the 2018 claim of news translations being of human parity was based on very limited evaluation criteria. Over the last years, of course, these technologies have progressed a lot.

The earliest systems were based on a hand coded set of rules and bilingual dictionaries. Since the 1990s, however, they have used previous human translations to compute the most statistically likely translation of a source text sentence. By the 2000s, free machine translation had become ubiquitous and around 2016 there was a leap forward in quality, brought about by neural machine translation (NMT). With the intention to replicate neural networks in the brain, these systems try to produce the most statistically likely translation for a sentence based on 'training data' – source sentences and their human translations.

Thanks to the increased accessibility and quality, online translation systems have become more useful and popular than ever. In 2016, for example, Google announced that their Google Translate system produced over 143 billion words per day, even though their accuracy sometimes leaves room for improvement.

Mistranslation and bias

While NMT's complex mechanical operations can produce fluent-sounding output, it can also generate something entirely unexpected, what researchers call 'hallucinations'. Common issues are mistranslations of nouns or verbs in a sentence that reads well but has a different meaning from the source sentence. Another pitfall: encoded

> **"Gender bias in machine translation can be very difficult to spot**

bias in systems, which can generate assumptions about certain adjectives, like 'beautiful', 'sassy' or 'sexy' to be female, and adjectives like 'decent', 'hard-nosed' or 'likeable' to be male.

These kinds of issues can be very difficult to spot and to resolve. Furthermore, ambiguous words that flummoxed early systems are still a problem, with occasional hallucinations having caused media flurries. A report from 2018 revealed examples of Google Translate translating random combinations of letters into religious prophecies.

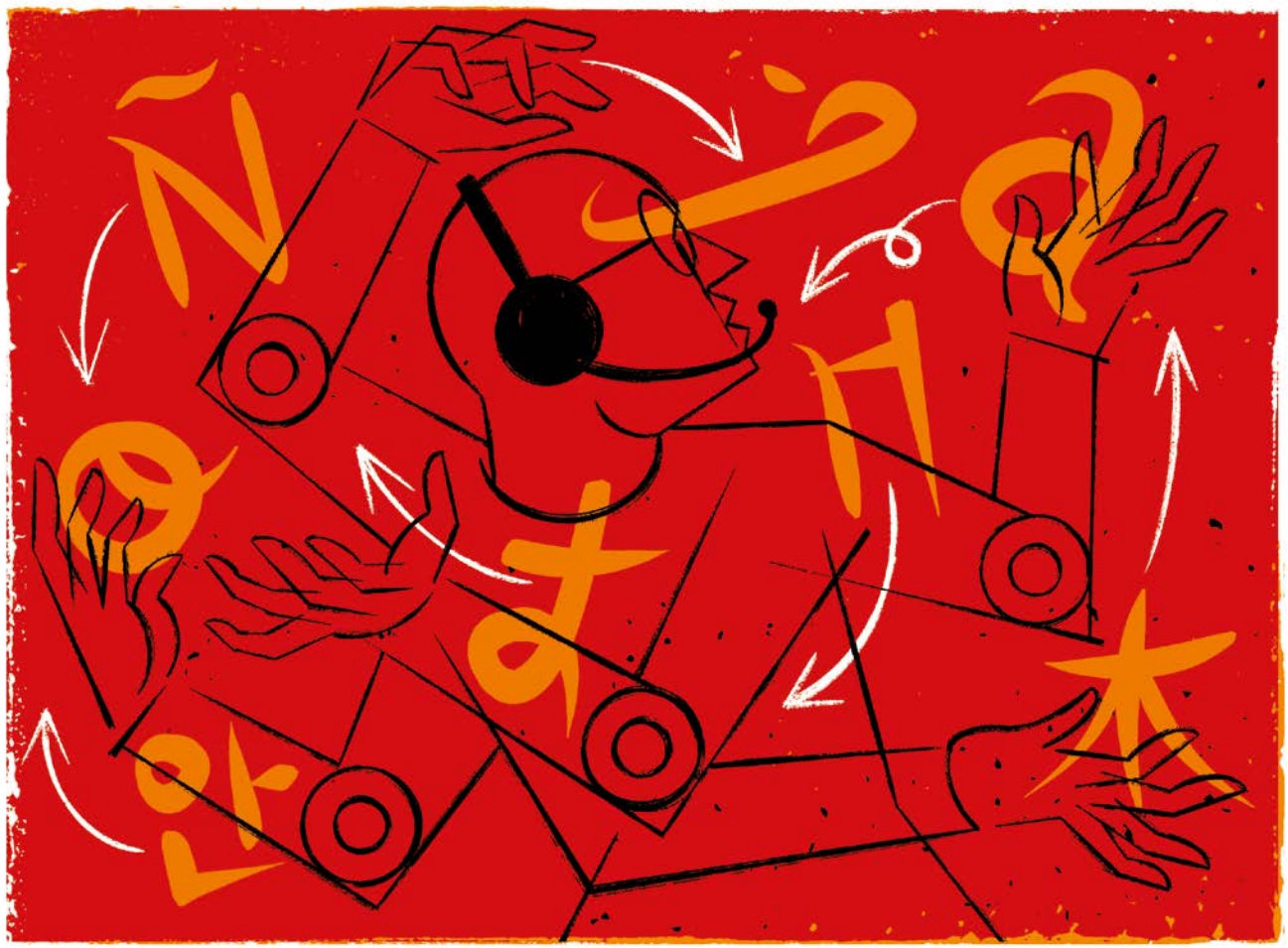
In the end, the intention of the author and the purpose of a text cannot be encoded into a machine translation system. Its output will remove lexical richness, defaulting to the most common words from their training data. For creative texts in particular, any trace of the author's voice will be lost, unless automation one day develops to the point of posing a threat to this more creative part of the job.

Reducing costs

Despite its limitations, machine translation is frequently used and post-editing has become an expected part of many translators' work: human-level quality and cost savings mean that machine translation is sometimes used or added to translators' workflows. As most translators work on a freelance basis, they may not be in a strong position to refuse. Many subtitling jobs, for example, involve post-editing of machine translation to save on cost and turnaround time – often with related viewer complaints about translation quality. Dr. Ana Guerberof Arenas, Senior Lecturer in Translation and Multimodal Technologies at the University of Surrey in the United Kingdom, recently reported that, although readers may find the output comprehensible, they are less engaged with the narrative and enjoy reading it less than a human translation.

> **"An author's intention cannot be encoded into a machine translation system**

To summarize, machine translation can be efficient and useful – with or without human intervention. Despite this, there is a risk that heavily automated work processes may render the translating profession less attractive. That is a worry for the sustainability of both machine and human translation. However, we must not forget that, as Prof. Dorothy Kenny from the School of Applied Language and Intercultural Studies at Dublin City University in Ireland, has noted: for machine translation to replace human translators, the former depends on the latter for its training data and for its legitimacy. ■



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