# GEOPOLITICS, GEOLINGUISTICS,
# AND TRANSLATABILITY

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## Geopolitics and geolinguistics

The only definitions listed for *geopolitics* in two recent dictionaries (the *Collins COBUILD* and the *Random House Webster's*) concern the relation between geography and politics. One older dictionary (*Webster's Seventh Collegiate* 1963) also listed the ominous definition of "a Nazi expansionist doctrine emphasising strategic frontiers, lebensraum, and racial, economic, and social pressures, and demanding reallocation of the earth's surface". One entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (whose first attestation of the term is from 1905) carried a similar import. The term has been used on the assumption that the *geo*-prefix broadly means "having reference to the earth", which is clearly its meaning in compounds like geophysics and geochemistry, and thus not restricted to geography proper. Instead, *geopolitics* would be defined as "a view or a mode of politics with an active concern for the overall planetary scheme of life" (cf. Beaugrande 1994; 1998). However, the term **geolinguistics** is perhaps more appropriate, and could be defined as "a view or study of language in relation to the overall planetary scheme of life".

If geopolitics and geolinguistics address the topic of geography, one key issue must be the role of *translation* among the languages currently suspended in a problematic symbiosis between *identity* and *modernity*. Specifically, modernity has come to resemble a commodity to be exported and imported, sometimes at ruinous prices, from the so-called first world to the third world. More forthright terms for this agonising division would be robber nations and robbed nations but these are unlikely to be adopted. More useful are the terms – coined probably by the eminent peace researcher Jon Galtung (1975; 1988) – of *centre* and *periphery*. These terms aptly signal the direction of the flow of wealth by means of undervalued currencies, underpriced labour and raw materials, and the servicing of horrendous foreign debts, measured against which aid from the centre, such as loans and credit from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, resembles the alms given to people one has reduced to beggars (cf. Frank 1979;

Hayter 1981; Manley 1991).

Insofar as modernity is a foreign import from the centre, it can pose a serious threat to cultural and linguistic identity at the periphery. To become modern, one casts aside traditional identity and emulates the peoples at the centre, who are themselves being propelled with accelerating frenzy into fresh modernity by high technology. Students who come to Yarmouk University from small villages in northern Jordan tell how communal life in the evenings has virtually died out as families sit immobilised in their homes consuming television shows either produced at the centre or made as imitations of shows from the centre.

From a long-range historical standpoint, the onrush of modernity from centre to periphery can echo the pat rhetoric of colonialism and imperialism about bringing modern civilisation to backward and primitive peoples. Geography itself was redrawn at the centre to undermine linguistic and cultural identity at the periphery by creating artificial countries with borders fixed in disregard of indigenous languages and cultures (cf. Bamgbose 1991; Phillipson 1992; Ngugi wa (1993). Moreover, atrocities like those in Biafra have demonstrated the fate of a linguistic group that tries to break away in search of its own geographical and political self-determination. The same European news media that voiced outrage over the tragedies of family separation, forced relocation and economic devastation, wrought by division of Europe by the Iron Curtain, regard the African situation as the normal and permanent state of affairs – deplorable, but a fact of life. Yet it is a fact imported to Africa along with the modernization first needed to subjugate or exterminate the local inhabitants with modern weaponry, and later needed to extract the wealth of Africa swiftly and efficiently with railroads, mining machinery or hydroelectric plants (cf. Mandela, 1986; Manley 1991). This modern equipment was left behind after independence for the para-military African governments and élites, who had learned modern European ways of controlling the populace, to extract the wealth, and to deal severely with dissident cultural and linguistic groups (Brunold 1997).

The most popular (and disingenuous) designation for imported modernity is development which, in the words of the Nigerian writer Oyekan Owomoyela (1996:208), "has in our time come to mean the abandonment of all habits and institutions that vary from the Western paradigm, and the radical assumption of Westernisms". Development is, thus, measured by the degree of a society's dependence on mechanical gadgets and the degree of the automatism of its relational practices, whilst the degree to which it relies on primary human skills and valorizes the human dimension in its transactions are understood to be measures of its underdevelopment. Modernisation and development influence the

languages of the population, especially when centre languages are also major imports. Yet whether and to what extent the imported language influences local cultures is an open question. This is apparent from testimony given by Steve Biko (1978:115), leader of Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa, on the legal question whether the term racially inflammable applied to a document circulated at the funeral of Nthuli Shezi, a black organizer of community projects who was killed by a train after being pushed onto the rails by a white railway worker:

Biko: If you put this into Zulu, you would find that is what any old man
     from the village would say about Nthuli ...

Attwell [prosecuting attorney]: The point is these are not in Zulu, they are in
     English.

Biko: But they are understood by people who are rooted in Zulu culture. ... They
     don't sit down to look at one word as such and say what it does it mean, no,
     they listen to the whole paragraph and understand the combined meaning. ...
     Zulu attaches not an analytical but emotional meaning to situations whereas
     English tends to be analytical.                              (Biko, 1978:115)

Biko implied that a local home culture can readily project its own meanings onto English discourse. If so, the importation of English need not by itself dislodge local cultures, though it can undeniably facilitate the processes which do.

**Translation as geopolitics and geolinguistics: theory versus practice**
        If it is agreed to define geopolitics as "a view or a mode of politics with an active concern for the overall planetary scheme of life", we have a key concept for the *ideology of ecologism*, defined in its turn as a concerted dialectic between theory and practice to expressly sustain a human life-style in harmony with our social and ecological environment (Beaugrande 1997a). This definition moves away from modernism by consciously rejecting the popular notion that modernity is both highly desirable and ultimately inevitable. And post-modernism is arguably the most significant intellectual and geopolitical counter-current today which insists on respecting and valorizing the cultural and linguistic identities and traditions of diverse groups (cf. Giroux 1992).
        If we extend these lines of reasoning, ecologism would also welcome the concept of geolinguistics as "a view or study of language with an active concern

for the overall planetary scheme of life". For those linguists whose work has been closely attuned to cultural anthropology, such K.L. Pike and M.A.K. Halliday, such a definition might seem plausible. Yet it has had little impact on the theoretical problems of translation as seen from the linguistic standpoints discussed by Georges Mounin (1963). Still, many specialists in translation between English and Arabic would probably admit that translation is a geopolitical and geolinguistic issue par excellence (cf. for example Menoufy 1982; Shunnaq 1994; Hatim 1997). This is a powerful reason why translation has not received until recently the serious and sustained attention it merits from linguistics which has been dominated by the idealization of language (cf. Beaugrande 1997a, b). Geolinguistics might provide a fresh basis for tackling the conundrums of translational *theory* and *practice* – terms which appear in numerous titles of collections of papers and monographs on translation. Yet, in the past theoretical work has been of limited use for practice, and practical work has been of limited use for theory. Providing a theory that can be observed in practice on authentic texts imposes a more geolinguistic standpoint than devising a top-down theory like Catford's (1965), which is illustrated with handfuls of artificial samples or isolated phrases or sentences and sometimes even less.

Perhaps mainstream linguists like Catford should not be blamed for trying to stay inside the limits of their staid discipline. Today, our major question for linguistics deserves to be turned around. We no longer ask: How would linguistics describe or explain the theory and practice of translation? Instead, we ask: How should a new geolinguistics be established, designed to contribute to the theory and practice of translation? Which among the available linguistic approaches might offer guidance to geolinguistics? Two possibilities: functional linguistics, such as the systemic linguistics developed mainly by Michael Halliday and his associates and fieldwork linguistics, such as the tagmemics developed by Ken and Evelyn Pike, Bob Longacre, and others. Both of these approaches have long maintained a cordial relationship with cultural anthropology because they were primarily designed for the description of non-European languages, a task where geopolitical and geolinguistic issues must be closely examined to make sense of linguistic data. The early work of the systemic functional linguists was influenced by the concentration of British general linguistics at the London School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). Specialisation in Oriental and African languages (for example, J.R. Firth and M.A.K Halliday for Chinese and Japanese, Braj Kachru for Hindi, T. J. Mitchell for Arabic, Ayo Bamgboe for Yoruba) compelled linguists to seek out language in authentic discourse, since the much-studied European languages of the centre afforded few clues of where to

look, or what to look for. The early political roots of this school were partially allied with British imperialism, which can be deduced from the writings of J.R. Firth who had been associated with SOAS since 1931 and who assumed the professorial chair in 1944. For Firth (1964 [1930-37]:209,136, 200), "the spread of European civilisation and the culture of the white race has made English a world language"; moreover, "English is the only practicable world language," and can be "taught in a normalised form the world over". In contrast:

> When the number of speakers falls below 100,000, the social and cultural value of the instrument from a world point of view is extremely doubtful; below 10,000 it almost ceases to be of any value outside the most primitive forms of group action and social co-operation. (Firth 1964 [1930]:208).

Such colonialist ideology must be repudiated by an ecologically responsible geopolitics and geolinguistics. Indeed, such repudiation was already achieved by the ideology of systemic functional linguists who, like Halliday, took an active interest in national language policies in newly decolonising societies. They sought to elaborate a

> socially accountable linguistics [that would] put *language* in its social context [and] put *linguistics* in its social context as a mode of intervention in critical social practices. All along, the main ideological input to what evolved into systemic theory [has been] to formulate a linguistics which would give value to the language of the 'other': non-European languages, unwritten vernaculars, non-native varieties of English, non-standard dialects, restricted codes, and so on. (Halliday 1994:73, his emphasis)

Halliday himself anticipated my conceptions of ecologism and geolinguistics when he voiced this applied linguistic concern "to learn to break the rhythm of endless growth, to identify ourselves with other species as part of a living whole, and to recognise that our planet is not a repository of infinite wealth and abundance" (1994:75). Another closely related geolinguistic application which Halliday anticipated, again in opposition to Firth was a "strong commitment to working on the language of a small threatened community as part of the effort to maintain their cultural identity" (1994:7). Here, one can look to anthropological fieldwork linguistics such as tagmemics. The early geopolitical roots of much of

this work were allied to missionary Christianity, and they attracted attention in translation studies by the problems they encountered for translating the word of God (cf. Nida 1947; Nida and de Waard 1986). Curiously, Christianity has in its Bible a dark explanation of the multiplicity of human languages, namely to "confound the speech of the whole earth" (*Genesis* 11:9). A better explanation would be the Islamic vision in the thirtieth *suura* of the Holy Quran we read in *'aaya* 22 (in the translation of Abdullah Yusuf Ali):

> And among His Signs
> Is the creation of the heavens
> And the earth, and the variations
> In your languages
> And your colours: verily
> In that are Signs
> For those who know.

The project of "giving value to the language of the 'other'" (Halliday) has also been a concern of sociolinguistics, notably in recognizing the status of non-standard varieties as valid systems with their own internal logic (cf. Labov 1970). But that field has been hardly less divisive than mainstream linguistics (Beaugrande 1999). Moreover, much of this divisiveness has arisen because of attempts to place a social framework on a linguistics whose theories of language had minimised the role of society. Moreover, sociolinguistics has not succeeded in laying to rest the colonialist and imperialist politics behind the ideology of world English which was enunciated by Firth. Joshua Fishman (1992 [1978]:21-24) has in his turn enunciated a "no-nonsense view of English [reflecting a] balance of power resting solidly [on] realities: English reigns supreme in the cruel real world, where econo-technical superiority is what really counts; [the lesson of history is quite clear] the sun never sets on the English language". Fishman saw no contradiction between his assertions that English is not "ideologically encumbered [and yet that it is] a major medium of the metaphor of mastery [and of] technological modernity and power" (1992:19). For Fishman, the users of English world-wide are the highest circles, indigenous elites (native foreigners), tourists (foreign foreigners), and third world recipients of Western largesse (ibid.:20).

It has already been remarked that Western largesse resembles alms bestowed on the very people one has reduced to beggars. However, some sociolinguists and language planners appear to regard the bestowal of centre languages, especially English, on the populations of the periphery as a desirable gesture of Western

largesse (cf. Phillipson 1992; Pennycook 1994). The fact that this largesse benefits precisely those who require it least – the indigenous élites – would be accepted by these same sociolinguists as part of the realities to be objectively observed by scientists of language and of translation.

The final and least documented source invoked here for a geolinguistics of translation would be large-corpus linguistics, which is currently transforming our basic notions about language and discourse (cf. Sinclair 1997, 1998; Beaugrande 1996, 1997c). We can expect similar revision and renewal in translation studies from research with multilingual corpora, such as English, French, and Spanish, at the University of Lancaster. The focus will initially be on terminology (cf. Pearson 1998), but wider lexicogrammatical issues are coming under scrutiny. Some of the consequences will be suggested later.

**The conception of translatability**

Instead of staying focused on translation and translating, both theory and practice of translation might profit by centering upon *translatability*, defined as the dialectical interaction between what would be required of translators and what actually gets achieved. This is not just one more division between competence versus performance, but a bi-directional vision of *translator ability*: the ways in which competent translators can perform and do perform, as well as how their performances affect and develop their competencies.

The ideologies of colonialism, imperialism, and world English depend on the ideology of limited translatability.  This is not to do with the traditional denials that poetry can be translated (cf. Croce 1902), but of the diehard notion that these supposed limitations impose an inevitable loss upon every product of translating. This notion is most glibly applied to translating from a centre language into a periphery language, during which factors are supposedly lost such as clarity, precision, certainty, rationality, technology and modernity. This ideology conveniently generates a natural hierarchy that matches the old racial and cultural hierarchies of colonialism and imperialism. Speakers of centre languages are automatically on top, since they can understand the originals. The fluent non-native speakers appear below them, like Fishman's indigenous elites or native foreigners. Considerably below them are those whose command of centre languages is not fluent. The bottom level is occupied by those who speak only the languages of the periphery and who cannot access the original texts at all.

This ideology dovetails insidiously with the tiresome multilingual puns between translator (*traduttore*) and traitor (*traditore*). We would be unwitting and unwilling traitors if we were compelled to give our target-language audience less

than the audience of the source-language texts. Even more insidiously, the same ideology can use the supposed limits on translatability to deduce inescapable limits on translator ability to justify such timeworn abuses as inadequate translator training programmes, publication of shoddy translations, plus poor pay and low recognition for translators. If the limits of translatability can never be overcome, who can complain about the limitations of one particular translation, and why should translators be paid more just to struggle against unbeatable odds?  The ideology of limited translatability forwards the interests of colonialism and imperialism by further eroding respect for the local home languages of the periphery, even among their own speakers. The limitations – so the ideology implies – are built firmly into the organisation of these languages. So language institutions at the periphery could not make headway by seeking to enhance their translatability. Far better leave these "little languages" (Fishman again) to their fate and scramble to join in what Fishman (1992:20) envisions a "veritable army of English-speaking econo-technical specialists, advisors, and representatives". An army, indeed, for the mother of battles over the assets of a globalized economy.

A more moderate version of this same ideology stipulates that translatability of the home languages of the periphery can be promoted provided they are reformed or intellectualized to resemble centre languages, especially English. This strategy is already well under way. Some of its impact on Arabic has been reported for Yousef Bader (1994) and Hosny A. Aal (1994). That impact is by no means limited to episodic loan translations, most of which are innocuous though gauche, like *kalaamun muzdawaj* for "double talk', or else patronising, like *jumhuriyyaatu almawz* for 'banana republics' (Bader 1994:96). Far more ominous are tendencies reported by Bader (1994:95):

1) use of the sentence word-order Subject-Verb-Complement, instead of the usual Arabic order Verb-Subject-Complement;
2) use of the present tense to refer to past or future events;
3) use of compound adjectives like *'afru-'asyawi*, 'Afro-Asian' by analogy to English;
4) use of the English way of expressing co-ordinated genitives, e.g. when 'the dreams and aspirations of peoples', which is normally rendered in Arabic as *'aHlaamu sh-shu_uubi wataTallu_aatuhaa*, literally corresponding to 'dreams of peoples and their aspirations', was found to be *'aHlaamu wataTallu_aatu sh-shu_'uubi* corresponding word for word to the English structure.

12

Both Bader and Aal underline the role played by journalism and the mass media, where the influence of English may well reflect the exceptional pressures exerted by rapid production time on Arabic translators using English news sources. But the cumulative impact upon the Arabic spoken among broader society may still be hugely deleterious. The Arabic language may be threatened by a translation-based trend toward an enforced modernity that could eventually compromise its identity. The outcome of this supposed enhancement of the translatability of Arabic (target language) for English (source language) can only be a fresh demarcation of what Fishman called "indigenous elites", and would give a new and vicious twist to his already duplicitous term "native foreigners". Today, the élites can set themselves still further apart from the ordinary citizens not just by speaking English in addition to Arabic but also by speaking an increasingly Anglicized (or Englishified) variety of Arabic which would cause additional communication problems and humiliation for ordinary speakers of Arabic, especially the elderly and the less educated.

The prospect we face is that either displacing Arabic with English or making Arabic resemble English will impose limitations upon expressability rather than *remove* them. After all, it should be remembered that:

> Much that in other faiths is expressed through art and music is, in Islam, expressed through the word, giving to verbal communication a unique importance. [...] The earliest Arabic classical writers speak of poetry and oratory as the two arts which the Arabs most admired and in which they most excelled. Both of them are of course arts of verbal persuasion; both were extensively used for political purposes. [...] In the days before the advent of the media, the poet had an important role in the field of propaganda and of what we nowadays call public relations. (Lewis 1988:10)

> Unlike a number of other world languages, [...] the Arabic language often explicitly marks the finest fluctuations in context, be they related to socio-cultural factors, to intentions, or to general communicative matters such as the formality of a given text, [by means of] rich, flowery lexis to cater for every minute nuance [and by means of] word-order manipulation [...] to communicate a wide range of added rhetorical effects. (Hatim 1997:xiv)

Thus, Arabic could well surpass present-day English in its richness of resources for public discourse, indeed in the public media and public relations, which are taking the lead in engineering the Anglicizing of Arabic, this richness is a vital part of Arabic identity, is now menaced by imported modernity. In Arabic, "regrettably, a yawning gap exists between the rich rhetorical tradition of the Arabs and the way the language is currently being used" (Hatim 1997:47). It is high time experts on Arabic language, terminology, and translation jointly resolved that those who translate into and out of Arabic should seek modes to exploit its rhetorical richness and deliver some of that richness to languages like English.

**Expressability in language and discourse**
     Top of the geolinguistics agenda propounded here would to promote *an ecologist ideology of unlimited translatability and translator ability* in both theory and practice. International programmes should be launched to develop and enrich each participating language to reduce or transcend the limits on translatability of the knowledge and information needed by its speakers. The goal may be utopian, but translation itself is fundamentally utopian, as Ortega y Gasset (1937) has taught us eloquently. On the theoretical side a principle could be invoked which linguists already accept, at least implicitly, and which we might call *unlimited expressability*: in everyday language, any meaning or content could in principle be expressed by any language. As every skilled translator knows, more often than not the meaning will not be expressable in different languages by identical linguistic means; what was grammaticalized may need to be lexicalized, and vice versa. Expansions, explanations, and expositions may be required and several alternatives may need to be proffered. Yet this does not limit translatability in principle.
     So far, there is still a serious deficit on the side of theories that could explain expressability in linguistic, cognitive, and social terms suitable for translatability. Most previous work, whether speculative, anecdotal, empirical, or experimental, has focused on the expressions themselves, assuming that these have meanings, content, concepts, signifieds, or referents, which come ready-packaged by the language system, as bundles of differential semantic features. Apparently, expressing is deemed an activity that words, phrases or sentences perform by themselves under the firm control of the lexicon and the grammar; like fitting together the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle to make so many different pictures.
     Theoretical research has seemed reluctant to reach out to expressability itself, even though this might be considered the first principle of translation theory. In consequence, one tends to imagine that these pre-packaged meanings determine

what can be expressed; overlooking, thus, the importance of theoretical research on rendering expressable what is not usually expressed, or has not yet been expressed at all. The main reason for this oversight has only become plain now that we have access to large corpus data: the order of language and of discourse are dialectically generated on-line. Until large samples are considered, some portion of that order will be missed, even if the researcher is a fluent native speaker, simply because anyone's experience with text and discourse is limited. For the same reason, we can gain from opportunities to stretch our competence into new areas a performance, and translation offers many.

So, if the order of language and discourse are dialectically generated on-line, the question can be put: What holds a language together? In real language, the grammar is held together by *colligability*, the tendency of some grammatical elements or patterns to attract each other, whilst the lexicon is held together by *collocability,* the tendency of some lexical elements or patterns to attract each other. Discourse in turn produces the grammatical *colligations* and the lexical *collocations* which partially realize these two sets of resources*,* and partly vary or innovate upon them. Many of the unpredictable, novel, or even unprecedented configurations in discourse are, therefore, easily produced and understood in terms of their relevant colligability and collocability.

**Theory and practice of translation revisited**

Some tentative conclusions can be offered. On the theoretical side, once it is granted that expressability is indeed unlimited in linguistic aspects, translation theory can use large real-life data-sets to determine how richly expressability is limited in social and cultural aspects. On the practical side, the training of translators could improve by focused browsing through selective bilingual large-corpus data. Our own description and awareness of data could be referred to the larger community of real speakers in order to refine our intercultural sensitivities.

Moreover, a component of large-corpus linguistics could bring a refreshing burst of geolinguistics into university departments or language centres that offer degrees or courses in translation. By browsing multilingual corpus data, future translators can observe for themselves how the comparative order of English discourse and of Arabic discourse are actively constructed; now that the hardware and software are no longer rare and expensive. Students find corpus-browsing more interesting and memorable than working through the artificial samples of conventional textbooks and training materials.

These are some of the prospects for geopolitics and geolinguistics to relocate

translation between modernity and identity as the twentieth century times out. There is nothing particularly radical or revolutionary about them. The consequences of the rise in international and multicultural communication must be faced, and new technologies can help us do so.

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