

SPECIAL FEATURE: AI AND LITERARY TRANSLATION

# AI and minoritised languages

## *Some personal considerations*

*Miquel Cabal Guarro*

In the last six months I have had the chance to participate in two online panels related to AI and translation on behalf of CEATL. The **first panel**, organised by the Translation and Linguistic Rights Committee of PEN International (TLRC-PEN), was devoted to *Technology and language diversity*. The **second panel** had the rather disturbing title of *What use the Humanities without human*, with a slightly more illuminating subtitle: *the value of human interpreting and human translation in a fragile world*, and was organised by the International Federation of Translators (**FIT**).

In the context of the preparation of these panels and the discussions they provoked I was prompted to contemplate various questions and concerns that resonate with two significant dimensions of my identity and profession. These dimensions are intricately intertwined, and it is nearly impossible to separate one from the

other when considering the array of inquiries that emerged from these panels. Consequently, I aim to address these questions from a dual perspective, drawing upon my experiences both as a professional in the field of literary translation and as a speaker of, and translator into, a minoritised language.

### **Lack of accountability**

As a professional in the field of literary translation, I am particularly concerned about a specific aspect of AI applications in translation: their ethical implications. The rapid development of AI has occurred without a comprehensive ethical framework. AI researchers have been advancing their technology without sufficiently questioning the moral and societal implications of their achievements. The undervaluing of humanities and the arts as essential components of education and everyday life may be a contributing factor to the absence of ethical boundaries in AI research.

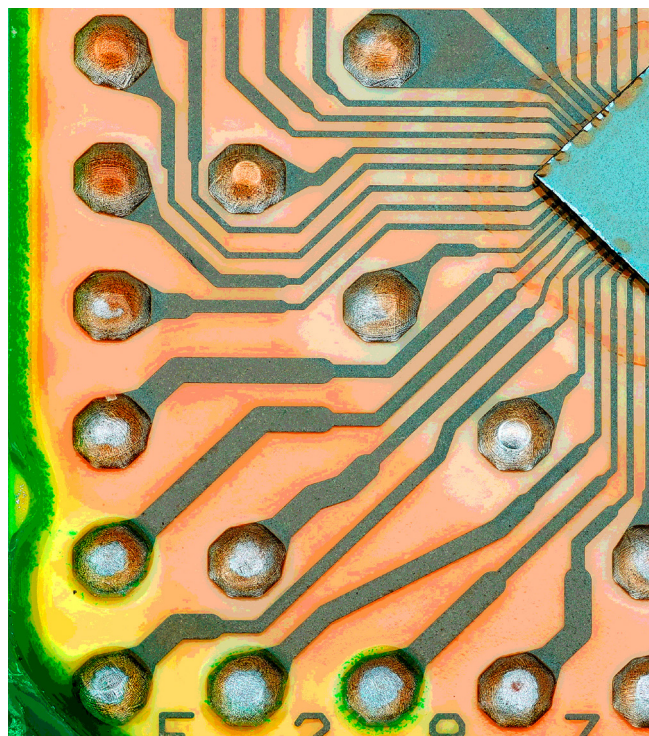


One of the key ethical issues with AI translation is the lack of accountability. Machines are not capable of justifying their choices in a given translation: they operate on the basis of consensus and compromise between various possibilities, and are often guided by mere frequency logic with the addition of a similar context. In contrast, human literary translators are always accountable for their choices, grounding their translations in the complexities of reality. While machines may indeed serve instrumental and utilitarian purposes in translation, the question arises: why would anyone prefer a machine-generated text over a human literary text, except for economic considerations? It is difficult to fathom any ethical argument that supports this preference.

I am fully aware of the potential advantages inherent in the deployment of neural processors for the analysis, summarisation, and generation of solutions in textual contexts. However, when we consider the broader macro dimension, it becomes evident that the need for regulatory frameworks and explicit ethical guidelines is paramount. The development and implementation of strong regulations under the guidance of explicit and even more robust ethical considerations can help strike a balance between technological advancement and responsible utilisation, ultimately promoting the greater good. Which is the common objective that should guide us in these distressing times.

### Digital diglossia

Secondly, as a speaker of a minoritised language or, to put it in the eminent



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sociolinguist Joshua Fishman's words, as a member of a "contextually weaker language community"<sup>1</sup>, there are key considerations regarding AI and translation that I would like to stress. The latest advancements in language technology are poised to give rise to what is termed *digital diglossia*. This concept characterises a scenario in which speakers of minoritised languages tend to prefer the dominant languages of their regions in their interactions with search engines, apps, AI interfaces, and various other machine-driven systems involving human languages. Maite Melero, one of the Catalan researchers of this area, argues that "bilingual speakers of a regional language and a global language, rather than missing the digital train, will opt for the larger language and set

<sup>1</sup> Fishman, Joshua A. (2006), *Do not leave your language alone*, Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, p. 90.

aside that which does not play a part in technological progress”. Digital diglossia has already been observed in recent research conducted on non-hegemonic languages such as Catalan<sup>2</sup> and it has been widely documented for a number of other European languages in a comprehensive project about [digital language equality](#), led and coordinated by the [ADAPT Centre](#) of Dublin City University and the German Research Centre for Artificial Intelligence ([DFKI](#)) in Berlin.

## “The discussion around AI should provoke deep ethical questions”

The findings of this research are of particular relevance to the field of literary translation. In summary:

*“Our results reiterate that digital language inequality poses a direct threat to Europe’s linguistic and cultural diversity. Europe has become or is about to become a continent where digital diglossia is the de facto context for many EU citizens, with the exception of English native speakers. When going about their online lives, EU citizens too often find it more efficient or even absolutely necessary to rely on other, more widely supported languages (predominantly*

*English) for certain services and information because this gives them greater access to high-quality and reliable content to a broader audience, and allows them to use more advanced technologies. This is true particularly for the younger generations, thus increasing the generational language gap and bringing lesser-resourced languages ever closer to digital extinction.”<sup>3</sup>*

As the authors point out in the quote, the prevalence of this diglossic behaviour, which has been observed and has been growing within the arts, sciences and business since the digital era of globalisation started, will of course contribute to the reduction of language diversity and accentuate inequalities between cultural communities. This phenomenon affects all non-world-wide hegemonic languages, from Tagalog to Danish, from Quechua to Italian. It is a matter that affects the vast majority of languages which Europeans speak, for example. Therefore, it is imperative to address these matters from political, social and especially ethical standpoints.

### Digital extinction

It seems undeniable that the digital extinction of many (the majority, in fact) of our languages could create a highly precarious scenario within the literary milieu. With the continued development of AI translation tools as observed in recent years, it is foreseeable that digitally strong languages (in contrast to digitally extinct or nearly extinct languages) will inevitably evolve into bridge languages for a wide array of language combinations. And this

<sup>2</sup> The results of a [recent survey](#) show, for example, that “almost 45.0% of Catalan speakers in Catalonia do not use Catalan to search on sites such as Google and YouTube”.

<sup>3</sup> Giagkou, Maria et al.







**Miquel Cabal Guarro** is a literary translator from Russian to Catalan and lecturer in Literary Translation and Russian Literature at the University of Barcelona. He has a PhD in Sociolinguistics and specialises in Slavic philology. He has published over forty translations of works by Dostoevsky, Dovlatov, Alexievich, and Platonov. He was awarded the 2021 **Barcelona City Prize** for the translation of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. He is treasurer of CEATL and is also a member of the board of the Association of Writers in Catalan Language (AELC).

**Miquel Cabal Guarro**  
**Photo: Joana de Querol**

will terminate the direct interchange between many linguocultural communities, which will be connected to other communities solely through the filter of the dominant and digitally stronger language of their region.

Even for those who translate from or into one of the few globally hegemonic languages, this discussion should provoke deep ethical questions about the use, misuse and potential development of AI and its applications within the literary domain, specifically in the context of literary translation.

As advocates of diversity, literary translators bear the moral duty to combat any kind of cultural abuse. So, let's maintain a watchful eye on AI while continuing to infuse our translations with human creativity. For the common good.

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