

The “Untranslatables” as Symptoms of Difference: From a Network of Languages to a Language of Networks

Hart Cohen¹
Western Sydney University, Australia

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to address the concern for the preservation of language difference and diversity. The threat to language diversity can be found historically in the dominance given to English and more recently, in the emergent forms of digital technologies. Their point of contact is the act of translation. In taking up Cassin’s concept of the “untranslatables”, the paper provides a critical foundation for thinking through the issue of language diversity. A focus on the translation of the bible into the Central Australian Aboriginal language of Aranda underpins how universal concepts are absorbed by the singularity of languages. In a re-think of the issues raised for translation practices when they are dominated by machine translation, digital technologies have also innovated new language usage exemplified by evolving forms in text messaging and the rise of image translation formats such as emojis. This raises the question as to whether specifically designed emojis for Indigenous speakers is a threat to, or a form that preserves and extends, Indigenous languages. The paper concludes with a consideration of the value of translation in a digital world where post-truth dominates the information landscape.

Keywords

digital communication, language difference and diversity, Indigenous languages, machine translation, language networks

No volverá tu voz a lo que el persa
Dijo en su lengua de aves y de rosas,
Cuando al ocaso, ante la luz dispersa,
Quieras decir inolvidables cosas. (Borges 116–17)

You will never recapture what the Persian

¹ **Hart Cohen** is Professor in the School of Humanities and Communication Arts at Western Sydney University, Australia. He is a member of the Institute for Culture and Society and supervises a number of postgraduate students. Prof Cohen is the co-author of the award-winning book, *Screen Media Arts* (Melbourne: OUP, 2008). His most recent book is *The Strehlow Archive: Explorations in Old and New Media* (Oxon: Routledge, 2018). He is the founding editor of the *Global Media Journal* (Australian Edition). Email: H.Cohen@westernsydney.edu.au

Said in his language woven with birds and roses,
When, in the sunset, before the light disperses,
You wish to give words to unforgettable things.²

“The original is unfaithful to the translation.”³

Preface

This article is based on a keynote address I was invited to give to the International Conference on Languages and Literature (ICLL) hosted by International Islamic University Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur (2020). The theme of the conference was Digital Trends in Language and Literature: Asia and the 21st Century. My address proposed a research case that married questions of translation of Indigenous languages (specifically the case of the Aboriginal language of Aranda/Arrente) with those of the digital mediation of language use. My choice of Barbara Cassin’s theory of the “untranslatables” is motivated by her interest in how translation is impacted when transferred to the digital sphere. My interest in Cassin’s theory of translation is based on the uniquely organic connection to her critical engagement with digital technology. I have privileged Cassin’s provocative theory of translation over other competing theories (e.g., Catford, Gideon) because my intentions here are not to canvas a review of translation theory but to test the application of Cassin’s approach to language usage mediated by digital technology. There is also a secondary strand running through the paper in connecting Cassin’s work to Evan’s interest in threatened languages such as Indigenous languages. The point of contact here is also with questions of translation, as demonstrated in my case study of the impact of Lutheran translation practices on the “survival” of the Aboriginal language of Aranda. To my knowledge, the theory of the “untranslatables” has not been connected to both endangered languages and the digital affordances that now mediate the evolution of these languages in the contemporary social and cultural contexts of language use.

Introduction

Nicholas Evans’s book, *Dying Words* (2009) takes its inspiration from the diversity and fragility of Indigenous languages, subject as they are to being lost to humankind through the ravages of colonisation, modernity, and assimilation. However, there is another mitigating factor in the survival of a language – that of the act of translation – or the rendering of one language into another or several others through processes we now identify with professional and scholarly

² Borges quoted in Nicholas Evans.

³ Borges “Sobre el Vathek de William Beckford (On William Beckford’s Vathek)”

methodologies.⁴ However, if as Evans states, "...a major cause of language loss is the belief that everything wise and important can be, and has been, said in English..." (xxii), the act of translation may itself contribute not to the preservation but the transformation of the language under threat. This view chimes with that of Barbara Cassin, who has lamented the advent of "Globish" or global English within the contemporary European context.⁵ Cassin argues in her *Dictionary of Untranslatables* (2004) that "untranslatables" are symptoms of difference. By this, she means to say that,

...the translation, into one language or another, creates a problem, to the extent of sometimes generating a neologism or the imposition of a new meaning on an old word. It is a sign of the way in which, from one language to another, neither the words nor the conceptual networks can simply be superimposed.... (xvii)

As I argue later in the paper, newly created languages may appear in newly emergent social, cultural, or technological contexts, and in this sense, may be less about language loss per se.

The purpose of this paper is twofold: First, I would like to link Cassin's and Evans' work in their concern with the preservation of language difference and diversity. Their point of contact is the act of translation. In the context of the implications of their work for Indigenous languages, I will present a case study related to the translation of the Bible into Aranda—a Central Australian Aboriginal language, the consequences of which feature some of the concerns raised by Cassin and Evans. Second, I will re-think Cassin's conceptual turn in the context of what Stalder terms the "digital condition" and the issues raised for translation practices when they are dominated by Google Translate and other machine translation. Cassin's concern with machine translation is related to her legitimate concern with the reduction of diversity in languages. I argue below, however, that the digital may facilitate the way social media and online communication have also innovated new language usage. These are exemplified by evolving digital translation formats such as emojis (now designed for the Aboriginal language of Aranda) and new language forms found in text messaging. A question arises as to whether specifically designed emojis for Indigenous speakers are a threat or a form that might preserve Indigenous languages.

⁴ These purposely exclude the non-scholarly processes of translation through interlanguages that arise as pidgins and creoles discussed later in this paper.

⁵ This is not to make equivalent the threat to Indigenous languages and the impact of "Globish" on European languages, however a point of contact and common concern with language loss can be attributed to both Evans and Cassin.

When Barthes presciently described the structure of a text as that of a network,⁶ he aligned literary communication with the elaborated relationships of a then non-existent digital world. We can see how this metaphor has now come to inhabit natural languages and the way translation, in Cassin’s words, “...starts from a nexus of untranslatability and proceeds to a comparison of terminological networks, whose distortion creates the history and geography of languages and cultures” (xvii). Cassin’s interests were in specific philosophical lexical problems and so contiguous with Barthes’ interest in literary communication. I will argue that Cassin’s and Barthes’ metaphor of the “terminological network” is also applicable to the ordinary communication of daily interlocutors.

Cassin: Lost and found in translation

What follows is a précis of Cassin’s main thesis and the origins of her concept of the “untranslatables”.

As for me, I would like to use translation as a counter-imaginary in relation to what we experience on a daily basis, a contemporary tool of culture and teaching, in short as a way of educating in citizenship. (210)

The central rationale for Cassin’s “Eloge de la Traduction” or “In Praise of Translation”, appears to be in the service of a kind of politics, as she suggests in the above quotation, “...translation... ultimately is a way of educating for citizenship...”. Her argument develops out of a decidedly antagonistic account of translation practices that she deems reductive and dangerous. She describes translation as a practice where the choice of an equivalent set of words in one language is meant to become their analogue in another – but one that always comes up short, “...neither quite the same in one, not quite in another...” (xvii). The result is a “universal overhang” or the universalising practices that lead to an administrative lingua franca, such as the one Cassin terms, “Globish” – a neologism for Global English. However, as Mailhammer argues, “...There are good linguistic arguments for assuming that even speakers of the same language perform mini-translations every time they decode a message. This is all the more the case in highly diversified languages including English”.⁷

Cassin is a philosopher, and so essentially, hers is a philosophical perspective that seeks to transform the practice of translation by subjecting it to a critical re-think. Cassin wishes to open translation to the relativism that she sees as a necessary consequence of a world within which post-truth pervades political

⁶ The metaphor of the text is that of the *network*.

⁷ Robert Mailhammer, personal communication.

discourse. She remains opposed to a universalist idea of Truth (with a capital ‘T’) and instead is concerned with truths (small ‘t’) and in her own re-working of the word “vérité”, re-places it with a new spelling “varités” to signify the multiple versions of truth that must be negotiated in a post-truth world.

How then, according to Cassin, can translation offer an approach to its own set of practices that have emerged in the contemporary contexts of technological and cultural change?

A clue or series of clues emerge in Cassin’s contribution to a book on the pre-Socratic philosopher-poet, Parmenides (515-450 BC). Presented in 2007 and published in 2011, Cassin’s work *Lost in Translation* follows her *Dictionary of Untranslatables*. However, the methodology and argumentation are evident in a much earlier work on Parmenides (“Parmenides, On Nature or On Being”) published in 1998. Cordero summarised her contribution as follows: “...Finally, Barbara Cassin asked the question that every scholar silently asks: Is it possible to translate Parmenides? Cassin’s conclusion is that “Parmenides is lost in translation” (xi) – i.e., that arriving at a definitive translation of the poem is jeopardised by its complex provenance.

Rehearsing Cassin’s full argument would not be possible within the space allowed here, as it reaches into the complexities of a philological analysis of the Greek language and Greek philosophy. However, it is worth noting Cassin’s deployment of the oft-used phrase “lost in translation”. Cordero suggests that this is Cassin’s conclusion to the dilemma of reading and, more to the point, interpreting Parmenides’ poem. Pre-empting her main analysis are three brief extracts from Heidegger, the third being the most germane to this argument. Cassin writes,

All translation is of necessity an interpreting. But the reverse is equally true: every interpretation and everything that results from it is a translation. (qtd in Cassin “Parmenides: Lost in Translation” 75)

This mirroring of translation and interpretation is a pre-text through which Cassin is able to grow a sense of openness to translation practices. The potential closure of being “lost in translation” is countered by the space offered up by the “untranslatability” of the Parmenides’ poem. As Scarantino has written in a review of Cassin’s work, “...It appears that no terminological reconstruction can restore the semantic space indicated by the text...” (100). However, this limitation in itself opens a path for philosophical thinking where a philological analysis that spans semantics, etymology, and cultural context forms a space for the creative reading and interpretation of the Parmenides’ poem.

In her forensic examination, Cassin finds the poem in the ellipses and fragments traced in the lexical formations of Parmenides’ text. In this regard, her

analysis is as much driven by the interest in the way Parmenides offers a conceptual framework that is not only in the Greek language but also about the Greek language. Cassin’s idea of the untranslatables is founded here in terms of her methodology, simultaneously acting as both the object and tool of its research case.

Philology and philosophy: Two Sides of the Untranslatables?

Cassin’s concept of the untranslatables is founded on a particular relationship between philology—the historical study of literary text, and philosophy—a more general reflection on these historical sources as a basis for interpretation. Thus, in working on translation, Cassin follows the principles of classic hermeneutic scholarship grounded in the revolving relationships between fine-grained analysis of texts (such as the Parmenides’ poem) and their role in formulating a comprehensive grasp of their greater significance to philosophy. To paraphrase Cassin from her book, *In Praise of Translation* (2016):

Translation is a rather unphilosophical way of producing what we are constantly chasing after, common knowledge. The method is neither synthesising nor dialectical—the usual philosophical operations used to ‘build conceptual continuity’. Translation navigates between resistant lone individual words, either in their own language or their analogues in another language—neither quite the same; not quite another. (210)

These produce effects:

which would encompass differences just as ‘Globish’ global English envelops and demobilizes the use of differential cultures which have become exotic idioms. (210)

Cassin’s diagnosis of translation practice sees it as reducing the diversity of languages. The response is ultimately a political act with civilisational consequences:

I would like to offer the praise for translation as a political model. It is an activity as old as the known world, of course, but which is generally considered as an indicator of agreement, *translatio studiorum* - *translatio imperii* (translation knowledge equals translation as a civilizational force – ed.); give me

the figures for fluctuation and I will give you the state of the world. Or as a clue: tell me what you think of the translation and I will tell you what a philosopher you are. To do this, I would try to re-examine what I call “consequent relativism” in the post-truth era. (210)

Cassin, in quoting Schleiermacher on the different methods of translating, writes,

... It is that “scarcely excluding” we must underline: even God and Being are illumined and coloured by language; the universality of concepts is absorbed by the singularity of languages. (“Vocabulaire européen des philosophies” xix)

Cassin here is channelling Schleiermacher’s ideas on the differences between languages and that even “the absolute universal, although it is outside the domain of particularity, is illuminated and coloured by the language” (115).

The next part of this paper takes up the controversy around this translation practice that echoes the tendency towards the creation of neologisms in translating the “untranslatables”. The specific reference to God as the “noun of nouns” – recalls one of the main controversies in the translation of an Aboriginal (Aranda) word for God—*altjira*⁸—when the bible was translated into Aranda by the Lutherans in Central Australia in the early part of the twentieth century.

Translating *Altjira*: The Dreaming, from God to Eternity

To argue that language is central to understanding Indigenous cultures is commonplace in anthropology and has been so for many years. A nuanced view of this argument is that while the translation of Indigenous languages offers insights into cultural practices, it is even more significant to understanding emotion and thinking (T.G.H. Strehlow, *Anthropology and the Study of Languages*). Both are undervalued by anthropologists in their early focus on Indigenous languages. This is mitigated by anthropology’s method of information gathering known as ethnography. Ethnography stands as the method of choice even as it finds new modalities (e.g., digital media) and perspectives (e.g., auto-ethnography) in its applied forms. In the context of working in non-western cultural contexts,

⁸ *Altjira* from the Aranda also was spelled *Alchera* in earlier iterations of attempts to transcribe this word (see Spencer and Gillen [304]).

ethnography has, with only a few exceptions, relied on translations of Indigenous language through the use of informants. The role and importance of informants to anthropological knowledge formation was a late-developing focus for the discipline (Clifford and Marcus). I will focus this case study on the works of Carl Strehlow – a Lutheran missionary and ethnographer, and T.G.H. Strehlow, who unusually was a native Aranda speaker and son of Carl.

The story of the translation of the bible into Aranda and the later translation of Aranda song into English begins with Carl Strehlow (1871-1922), who was actively converting Aboriginal people to Christianity in the early part of the twentieth century. Carl Strehlow and his son, T.G.H. Strehlow (1908-78) were both important “translators” of Aranda cultural traditions. What sets them apart from their contemporary translators—anthropologists such as Baldwin Spencer—was the grounding of their studies in linguistic competencies. As Lutherans, this interest in Aboriginal languages was also strategic and a key to successful missionisation.

Carl Strehlow translated the Bible and other religious texts into Aranda, while his son eventually translated poetic Aranda song into English. The translation cycle of these religious and culturally significant texts, Aranda—English/English—Aranda is a unique feature of the cultural and social space of the Hermannsburg mission, which in time gives way to the Aboriginal estates of Ntaria. Thus, biblical text and Aranda’s cultural poetics have come to co-exist and inform one another.

However, if biblical translation in the service of missionisation took up the work of conversion, it also resulted in ontological shifts for the Aranda people (Austin-Broos). This links into Cassin’s point; that translation has civilisational consequences. As Austin-Broos, in reference to the impact faced by Aranda people in the face of colonisation and missionisation, writes,

When I argue this course of change has involved ‘ontological shift,’ I do not mean by that simply changed conditions. Rather I have in mind Heidegger’s idea that the very materiality of life including both the natural environment and things of social life, is defined by particular acts, ‘concernful dealings’. (5)

Biblical translation changed Aranda words and invested them with new meanings. In tandem with a change in lifestyle (from nomadic to sedentary living), significant changes to totemic affiliations, such as those associated with conception sites, also took place. A conception site where a mother first feels the foetus turn in the womb once held totemic significance. This is no longer the

case. Austin-Broos explains the different meaning now given to “conception site” as follows:

...it is telling that a Western Arrernte term once used for ‘conception site’ *ngampekele* now has the meaning in Christian prayer of ‘eternally’ or ‘everlasting’ as in *ngampekele (for ever and ever, Amen)*. A term that once described emplaced being is purely temporal now in the Arrernte Lutheran liturgy.⁹ (112)

This word in translation demonstrates how Aboriginal cultural knowledge was confronted and transformed by a Christian ethos. Cassin’s insistence on translation as a political act is exemplified by the change to the meaning of *ngampekele*. It is worth asking if the act of translating the Bible into Aranda as a handmaiden of missionisation was also an act of cultural hegemony.

Altjira as word and concept



Figure 1 Jesus superimposed on Twins of Ntaria totem

If there is an ideal candidate for entry into Cassin’s *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, it is the Aranda word, *Altjira*. This was the subject of David Moore’s chapter “Altjira, Dream and God” (2016) and anticipated my interest in the connection between untranslatability and Aranda thought and language.

⁹ This was essentially the same in Christian Rome where the term *pontifex maximus* (the high priest) was recruited to express the meaning of ‘archbishop’, or when the Christian missionaries recruited the common Old English word for ‘crime’, OE *synn* to mean ‘crime against God’, i.e., ‘sin’ (Mailhammer, personal communication).

T.G.H. Strehlow states that *tjurunga* and *altjira* are two Western Aranda terms that have “no single counterparts in our language” (*Anthropology and the Study of Languages* 18). In Cassin’s terms, these words are “untranslatables” and need multiple sources to fully understand the differences in how they have been translated over time and in relation to a variety of social and political contexts. Strehlow notes that “the term *altjira* has been extensively discussed in eight pages of Appendix D in Baldwin Spencer and Gillen’s, *The Arunta*, Volume II (*Anthropology and the Study of Languages* 18).

Altjira was also one of the key terms worked on for translation by Carl Strehlow. John Strehlow (Carl’s grandson [1946-]), in his biography of his grandfather and grandmother, offers a critical account of Spencer’s treatment of Carl Strehlow’s ethnographic work and frequently touches on the meaning of *altjira*. He writes, “Carl proposed the derivation of *altjira* from *altja* meaning ‘he who belongs to me, with whom I have commonality’ while making it clear that the actual meaning of the word had become lost” (J. Strehlow, *The Tale of Freyda Keysser* 948). This echoes Cassin’s analysis of the Parmenides’ poem as “lost in translation” and suggests how meanings of words can become shrouded in the mists of time. The detail and complexity of this term’s successive translations are complicated. Moore (88) in his reading of Spencer’s mistaken translation narrative of *Alchera* (*Altjira*) states,

Carl Strehlow (1907, p.3) realised that *altjira* and *altjira rama* are members of different word classes. He understood which words Aranda speakers used, the frequency of their use and their significance in the linguistic system and worldview of the speakers. Dreamtime was an invention of the anthropologists (Wolfe, 1991, p.199), which as Carl Strehlow realised was not a functional equivalent of *altjira*. (89)

It is important to highlight that *altjira* was given the attribute of “God” by Carl Strehlow—specifically one who inhabited the sky and was beneficent but was not always involved in human affairs. This latter sense of a deity, despite being debated frequently, tended to be resolved in the affirmative. Spencer and Gillen, however, translated *altjira* as “dreaming” because of its proximate relation to the Aranda verb *altjirerama* translated as “to dream”. There is a faulty grammatical logic here, borne out by Carl Strehlow’s ethnographic experience—the Aranda told him they had no word for “dreams”.

If *altjira* translated as dreaming was an invention of anthropologists and made current through interlanguage processes, how did the missionaries arrive at *altjira* as “God”? The possible answer here is that missionaries would, as a matter

of biblical translation, require an equivalent term for “God” and any translation would necessarily be an invention reflecting this bias. However, in Carl Strehlow and later his son T.G.H., the interest and expertise in Aboriginal language allowed for a nuanced choice of *altjira* for God. The subject of T.G.H. Strehlow’s MA thesis was Aranda grammar (*Aranda Phonetics and Grammar*) and he had an excellent grasp, as a native speaker of Western Aranda, of not only the limitations but also the specific attributes of Aranda. T.G.H. Strehlow says of the Aranda spoken at Hermannsburg that the “third generation of converts born at the Mission has successfully developed a vocabulary which expresses most of the common terms of Christian theology in their own language” (T.G.H. Strehlow *Anthropology and the Study of Languages* 26).

Carl Strehlow, as indicated earlier, was both an ethnographer and missionary. In his selection of *altjira*, Moore reports that Strehlow was cautious in finding a linguistic derivation for *altjira*. He claimed that when he questioned Aranda speakers, they responded, “*Erina itja arbmanakala*” or “no one created him” (102).

While Moore claims that Carl Strehlow did not “etymologise” but reported what his informants told him, it lends much to his linguistic expertise as a “translator” and in being able to translate the untranslatables. Moore claims Carl Strehlow’s method was fully “hermeneutic” (106) in its approach to translation and would qualify as an entry into Cassin’s *Dictionary of the Untranslatables*. Cassin, however, might also object here to a wholly dominant imposition of a theological framing within which this translation owes its ultimate meanings and to what ultimately, as she put it, may have “consequent relativisms”.

Much later, T.G.H. Strehlow’s unfinished manuscript, *The Land of Altjira* is translated as the *Land of Eternity*.¹⁰ The trajectory of meanings along which this word can be seen to travel over time suggests something of the layering of Christian, Aboriginal and poetic sensibilities that are at issue in the struggle to understand this one critically important word. However, some explanation must be offered for the predominance of the use of “dreaming” or “dreamtime” by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Moore explains that “dreaming” is adopted as part of the development of an interlanguage¹¹ which “develops when speakers of an Aboriginal language learn English and local Aboriginal Englishes” (98). Quoting an Aboriginal *elder* (older members of an Aboriginal group who

¹⁰ This was an elaborated version of his field diaries prepared in 1959.

¹¹ An interlanguage is an idiolect that has been developed by a learner of a second language (or L2) which preserves some features of their first language (or L1) and can also overgeneralise to some L2 writing and speaking rules (Selinker).

have cultural knowledge to impart to younger generations), Moore notes, “but we just got used to saying the phrases in the Dreamtime” (99).

The use of the word “dreaming” re-affirms T.G.H. Strehlow’s view, in anticipation of Cassin, that translation is problematic where a word may have no single linguistic counterpart across the cultural/language divide. As he states, “*altjira* and *tjurunga* are two of the keywords constantly associated with the concepts found in the peculiarly Australian mythology; and we must guard against a single, mechanical, English translation for either word” (T.G.H. Strehlow *Anthropology and the Study of Languages* 18). Moore concludes, “The so-called polysemy of pre-contact (where a word could have multiple senses) is, rather, a case of untranslatability” (94).

By the time T.G.H. Strehlow came on the scene in the 1930s, he was following his father’s lead in his work on the language and poetic competencies of the Aranda. However, well into his work with the Aranda, he described their civilisation as one “full of wreckage and damage” (Philip Jones in *Mr Strehlow’s Films*). This description refers to the consequences of the Western invasion of Aranda land, the subsequent theft of sacred objects, and the consequential disconnection of people from their traditions. It is therefore, only from our vantage point beyond the dystopic future contemplated by T.G.H. Strehlow that we can now appreciate the resilience of contemporary Western Aranda in the face of colonisation and missionisation.

From the Translation of Indigenous Languages to the Digital Mediation of Translation

This next section of the paper moves to the digital mediation of translation where I examine how Cassin’s work extends her analysis of “untranslatability” to the realm of the digital. What Cassin terms “googalisation” is paralleled in the way Indigenous languages have been transformed by translations motivated by ideological or religious interests of the kind in the case of Aranda referred to above. A key text used to underpin this theory of translation is Marshall McLuhan’s *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. McLuhan’s work theorised how orality and print cultures were constructed through media bias. Orality focused on oral/aural communications while print is biased toward the visual. As McLuhan is accorded patron saint status by *Wired Magazine*, his communication theories are seen as the precursors to the worlds of digital communication.

Translation and the Digital Condition

In this final section of the paper, I would like to examine Cassin’s interest in machine translation and the “googalisation” of translation as it predominantly occurs on the web. I will follow this, however, with an indication of the innovative

ways the digital has opened up new language formations for communicative interactions.

When thinking of translation in the digital world dominated by Google Translate and other machine or artificial intelligence affordances, one might think that this too is part of Cassin's concern with the reducibility of diversity in language. Michael Cronin's book, *Translation in the Digital Age* was published in 2013. Seven years on, his key questions are still pertinent to how we need to think about what may not only be a digital age, but perhaps also a new age of translation:

In the age of Google Translate, is the human translator condemned to large-scale extinction, or to the quaint ... Sunday hobbyist? The demand for translation keeps growing apace in the contemporary world, but will humans continue to be asked to service this need, or will it be our machines that will do the bidding? (1)

The questions asked here have a familiar ring. The theme of the role of technology in rendering humans obsolete is common in both fiction and scholarly commentary when considering the potential for robots and artificial intelligence (AI) to replace human actors.

Cronin's argument proceeds to move well beyond this and seeks out a specific ground on which he can analyse the critical fault lines along which translation practices can be re-theorised. The first node is that of technology as a civilisational force – familiar to those who have been working within medium theory (McLuhan's work is cited by Cronin but not Harold Innis who may be more central to the thesis of civilisational change driven by the use of dominant media). McLuhan's thesis in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) laid out a definitive thesis of technological determinism in the civilisational and sensorial impacts wrought by the transition from manuscript to the movable type or the printing press. Cassin refers early on in her polemic on Google to McLuhan's historical perspective when she states, "not since Gutenberg, has any invention empowered individuals and transformed access to information as Google..." (6).

The inexorable rise of new communication technologies in the last and this century can be situated in this trajectory and our current critical engagements through what is termed the *Digital Humanities*, is a continuation of the path set up by mid-twentieth century scholars who were the medium theorists of their time. So, if the digital age is also the age of translation, what critical and conceptual tools can be brought to bear upon the current forms that translation now adopts to further its instrumentalist goals of transparency or equivalency across languages?

One of the more interesting approaches is taken by Carolyn Marvin, whose book is titled, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking About Electric Communication in the 19th Century* (1988). Her book is a contribution to the history of communication specifically the consequences of two newly invented communications technologies, the telephone and the electric light, for societies in the nineteenth century. Looking backwards in this fashion, Marvin opens up relativist perspectives on the technologies in question. In this way, the instrumentalism of these technologies is subverted to a focus on the resulting disrupted relationships and their social responses. This approach could be profitably applied to the emergence of digital communications technology in the late twentieth century.

“Google Moi” and Google Translate

As Geert Lovink once stated, “...we are all worker bees for Google and Facebook...”.¹² He stated this at a relatively early point in time when the ascendancy of these platforms had only begun in earnest to establish their own cultural economies of a scale unprecedented in the capitalistic world. He alluded to the pretensions of both Google and Facebook to claim that they offered unfettered so-called “democratic” access to information and communication. It appeared that this was offered at no expense to its users. However, as Cassin notes, each one of “us” “...constitutes a portion of the information that appears on the Web... You are the Web,” (V). Thus, in concert with Lovink’s idea, we are not only a portion of the web; we work for it. Our personal data has value and is bought and sold with regularity every time we perform a search on google or log in to Facebook and enhances the dominant motif that underpins these platforms’ economic model – that of advertising.

Applying this approach to machine translation and its consequences, we can ask similar questions: How has the ideology of “solutionist corporate disruption” impacted knowledge maintenance and production? These radical challenges confront not only academia but also fundamentally change public engagement with information. How has machine translation transformed social and professional relationships in regards to translation practices? What are the sources of the responses to these disruptions?

These questions are addressed by Cassin in her work *Google Me: One-Click Democracy* (2017) published originally as *Google-moi: la deuxième mission de l’Amérique* (2007). Cassin’s work on translation was complemented by her sustained interest in Google over time, given the gap between the original French publication in 2007 to its re-appearance in translation in 2017. As with Marvin’s approach to the emergence of the telephone and electricity, Cassin looks at Google Translate

¹² Geert Lovink was speaking to the postgraduate conference, *Intersections and Interventions*, Western Sydney University, 2015.

when it was relatively new and adapts her expertise in philology and philosophy to these concerns.

Cassin sees her approach to translation as concomitant with the Digital Humanities, where "...translation informs our languages and civilizations, and especially how it constitutes a know-how with differences..." (6). She sees great advances in machine translation and specifically Google Translate in the way it moved from a rather primitive translation practice and which now has implications for her work in the *Dictionary of Untranslatables*.

In this work, Cassin interrogates the semantic and syntactic differences across fifteen languages. The so-called "symptoms of difference" are focused on philosophical gaps. These are not so much "untranslatables" but act as a spur to further translation through comparative and critical analysis. Her interest in the gaps between the terms and what their slippages may imply or betray is in direct opposition to Google's attempts to "organize the world's information" (Cassin *Google Me: One-Click Democracy* 3)

Google Translate now works with large word clouds offering a larger context base where the quality of context is the key to a good translation. However, whereas the *Dictionary of Untranslatables* offered up a surfeit of qualitative interrogations, Google Translate relies on quantitative or a scaled-up number of exemplars for translation. Cassin sees the possibility of marrying the quantitative and qualitative methods for the best results. In this account of Google Translate when it was new, one of the major shifts has seen a move away from Google to Facebook or other similar platforms. Social media has now taken on a hegemonic place in web-based interactions.

Social Media and New Forms of Translation

In the recent shift in online practices to social media uses, the nature of language use has also shifted to reflect this new emphasis on social connectivity. In this regard, the concern about the reduction of language diversity encounters a new reality of innovative language use and the emergence of pictographic translation (e.g., emojis) in the context of the Internet's general shift to still and video images as its communication currency.

Texting and Code-switching

It may now be commonplace to find code-switching within cultural and national formations where at least two languages are regularly used. There are multiple instances of this situation around the world. My interest in this stems from my country of origin, Canada, and place of birth, Montreal, Quebec. Returning recently, I was interested to come upon an instance of texting material that was quite opaque to me. The challenge was to understand not only the code-switching (between English and French) but also abbreviations and the fact that Québécois has much *jouale* or argot that has always distinguished it from classical Parisian

French spoken in France. This is one example of such an exchange via text message:

Text	Translation
Yo ma mom fait du paté chinois Chinese pastry Shepherd’s Pie (Québécois style)	hello there; my mum made (literal);
So, on mange chez toi?	So, are we eating at your place?
Yea mais after down town	yes but after we go downtown
On y va?	Shall we go?
Att ma mom veut que je range qqch so mum my stuff (qqch = quelque chose)	(Att = “A tantot” – See you Soon – my wanted me to clean up
I’ll call you when I’m there, ca va etre pas trop long, c’est good?	I will call you when I’m there, it won’t take too long. Ok with you?
Fri Je sors live	I am leaving now
Mon Heyyyy Ktfff doing?	Hey hello Quest tu fait? What are you
T a mtl??	(Tu a) Are you in Montreal?
Weds	
Bonne ANNEE	Happy New Year!
A cause du drink	because of drinking (too much)

Tkt jte donne 11\$ c half and half
 <je te donne>
 11\$ - so half/half

TKT = t'inquiète Don't worry!
 I will give you

Tkt

Don't worry!

C'est juste que je pensais que c'était moins
 que ça 😂

its just that I thought it would
 be less than that

Ta talk avec ma mom?

Did you talk with my mum?

Je suis pas allé finalement

I did not go in the end.

Ah

I see

Es que tu m'amène ma carte?

And did you bring my card?

Soon

soon

Yo sleep over demain?!

Will you sleep over tomorrow?

Yoo; call me
 when ur done everything ❤️

Yes, call me
 once you've done everything

This is a good example of code-switching. There are also specific abbreviations that are also code-switched; there is the use of emojis and the use of Québécois. To an outsider, this text appears as a new language at times. Social media with text messaging embedded (e.g., Instagram) would also foster this kind of language use. This suggests that the digital has enervated new forms of language communication.

Emojis for Aranda

“Indigemoji app provides 90 emojis representing central Australia’s Indigenous Arrernte culture” (ABC News).



Figure 2 Examples of Indigemoji from ABC News Online

The move to an Internet dominated by images — both still and moving — may stem from a moment in 2009 when there was consensus around the killer apps of video that are now ubiquitous. Google had already bought YouTube in 2006 and its business model was just emerging. Google played a key role in developing UNiCODE, enabling emojis to cross platforms and devices.

The history of Emojis has them sourced as far back as 1881 when emoticons appeared, but their contemporary usage is based on the work of Japanese designers. The word itself is based on the Japanese *E* for “image” and *moji* for “character”. A few versions of emojis emerged through the late twentieth century but took off in conjunction with smartphone and then their incorporation in social media.

The emergence of indigenous emojis only now suggests that the emojis tended to be culturally centric in their universalisation. It, therefore, was an initiative of cultural workers in the Indigenous community of Ntaria, who are Aranda speakers, to invent culturally appropriate emojis. Some key points are, a) the Indigemoji app includes 90 emojis based on Arrernte cultural symbols and language, b) it was downloaded more than 20,000 times on its first day, making it Apple’s most popular social networking app and c) the app’s developers hope it encourages Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians to learn the language.

In the context of Indigenous language preservation, this project is seen as a means of language and cultural maintenance. The indigemojis were designed and created by local Aranda young people. They focus on important aspects of cultural, flora and fauna of central Australia. The project involved *Elders* to advise on aspects of cultural and natural aspects of their homeland where some of these animals have disappeared but retain cultural importance.

As a pictographic language used frequently in online communication, this specific innovation is related to the way digital technology has re-defined human

communication. Our devices and social media affordances command that we innovate ways of translating the world to maintain our relationship to it and to one another. While it could be argued that an innovation of this kind could erode the use of Aranda as an oral and written language, the creators of the app have included Aranda and English translations and so accessing the pictograms also gives immediate access to the language as well. However, as Mailhammer has noted,

...Since these emojis are often designed by outsiders and then the original is English, then the Arrernte (Aranda) version is just a rendition. A real step forward would be emojis that are invented by Aboriginal people and which then perhaps would not have an equivalent in English. In language documentation, we often go from English to X, while an immersive approach advocates to learn X and then see what is equivalent in English.¹³

This suggests that if the emergence of these Aranda emojis were developed/invented by Aranda people (as I understand they were), the concepts represented by these emojis can be sourced to Aranda thinking and so may qualify as “immersive” in the way Mailhammer suggests.

CODA: The Purpose of a Good Translation

“The purpose of a good translation is to reproduce faithfully both the matter and spirit of the original”. (Mulvaney 84)

I take the title of this CODA from a conference paper presented by eminent Australian historian, John Mulvaney and subsequently published in the conference proceedings. The importance Mulvaney attributes to the practice of translation here is underpinned by the content. The translation in question is given by T.G.H. Strehlow of an oral history given to him by informants who were the descendants of those who witnessed a massacre of Aboriginal people in 1874. Mulvaney checks on two versions of the translated oral history offered by T.G.H. Strehlow and concludes that the evidence Strehlow provides in this material is a robust account of the events of this human tragedy in its historical context.

This, in my view, suggests the importance of rigorous and careful translation such that it can function to provide accurate accounts of all dimensions of social and cultural life. In our current era of political polarisation, platform-generated disinformation caused by filter-bubbles, high-quality

¹³ Mailhammer, Personal Communication

translation is of vital importance. From those places in our world that are under severe and potentially lethal repression, can we be assured that the “translation” of the above concerns provides the transparency we so desperately need? Despite Cassin’s claim that “...we have not yet modelled the know-how of a good translator...”, the demand for a ‘good translation’ is no less vital or urgent.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have presented the work of Barbara Cassin on her provocation that translation requires a philosophical approach that privileges conceptual re-framing of words and ideas. I have demonstrated that in the case of the Indigenous language of Aranda, the Lutheran translation of key biblical terms was motivated by the intention to missionise the Aranda people. I have deployed the usual analytical methods of textual analysis with a review of a case study on how the Lutherans have translated the bible into Aranda and the debates established by Carl, T.G.H. Strehlow and others on the meaning of *Altjira*. This case study robustly demonstrates the potential for the distortion of an oral language when transformed into a written one. My use of McLuhan’s work, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, recovers his attributions of the difference that media bias makes between oral and print cultures. This establishes the link between the account of the translation concerns raised by the Lutheran translation of Aranda into print and English and takes up McLuhan as a communication theorist who is often cast as having predicted the coming of the digital age. Cassin’s critical intervention on the digital mediation of language through digital affordances found on platforms such as Google is tempered in part by the emergence of the creative use of text in code-switching on smartphones and the invention of Indigenous forms of emoji. Both signal that we may need to re-think our views of translation and language preservation in the digital age.

The paper has worked exclusively with the translation theory of “untranslatability” as put forward by Barbara Cassin. Other translation theories have not been canvassed as Cassin’s theory is consonant with interpretative translation approaches and suited the paper’s case study of the Lutheran approach to the translation of Aranda. Further research on the impact of mission and/or colonial contact on Indigenous language and the translation of their language into English would add significantly to the understanding of the issues of language maintenance and transformation. Further research on the digital mediation of translation would be welcome as we are at the very beginning of this critical field in the context of the emergence of new information and communication technologies.

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