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**OUT OF THE DOMINANT POLITICAL AGENDA:  
TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETING NETWORKS FOR SOCIAL ACTIVISM**

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“Translation is a form of engagement when the necessary partiality of translation becomes *partisan*, when translators adopt advocacy roles in situations of socio-political inequalities” (SIMON 2005: 11).

**New Approaches in Translation/Interpretation Practice**

On several occasions, Moira Inghilleri has addressed the interesting topic of the status of the translator/interpreter in the communicative context, looking particularly at the clash between the practitioner’s professional duties and his or her personal ideology or conscience. In my previous intervention in Vienna last July, I had the opportunity to comment on this topic and on Inghilleri’s opinions on the matter,<sup>1</sup> opinions which often give rise to a discussion of concepts like “fidelity,” “literalness,” and “the ethics of translation.” For instance, in her intervention at the first International Forum of Translation / Interpreting and Social Activism, organised in April 2007 by the University of Granada (Spain) in collaboration with ECOS (the Association of Translators and Interpreters for Solidarity),<sup>2</sup> Inghilleri again turned her atten-

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<sup>1</sup> CAMPS, Assumpta. “THE CHALLENGES OF LEGAL SERVICES IN MULTICULTURAL SOCIETIES”. IN: *THE MANY LANGUAGES OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE*, WORLD ICLA Conference - University of Vienna (July 21-27, 2016), forthcoming.

<sup>2</sup> See INGHILLERI, Moira. (2009). *Epílogo de Moira Inghilleri: Exploración de la labor del traductor activista*. En: BOÉRIE, Julie & MAIER, Carol (eds.) (2009). *Compromiso social y Traducción /Interpretación. Translation/Interpreting and Social Activism*.



tion to the importance of political and ethical criteria in performing the work of the translator / interpreter. She situated these criteria *at the same level* as linguistic or cultural competence. In this respect, she added:

More recently, there has been a greater recognition of the need to theorise over ethical practice, so that it is not limited to the question of representation, but that, by contrast, *the ethics of translation are based on political, moral and social responsibility*. (Inghilleri 2009: 346, my italics and translation)

Inghilleri went so far as to establish that “the current ethical approach within the field of T/I studies underscores the importance of translation as a force for social and political change”. (Inghilleri 2009: 347)

This is also the position taken by Mona Baker in many of her writings in recent years that have been focused on establishing new theoretical foundations for the study of translation from a social standpoint in light of the challenges posed by globalisation.<sup>3</sup> As we know, Baker’s approach is focused primarily on the study of narrativity, and the development of theories addressing how narrative communities are built and how they function —whether the case at hand concerns personal narratives, public ones, the narratives of a discipline, or metanarratives. Such communities include networks of activist translators/interpreters, such as

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Granada: ECOS, 345-348. Translated from English by Ignacio Carretero and Pedro Jesús Castillo Ortiz.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, BAKER, Mona. (2009) “Resisting State Terror: Theorizing Communities of Activist Translators and Interpreters” in: BIELSA, Esperanza & HUGHES, Christopher W. (eds.). *Globalization, Political Violence and Translation*. Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 222-242. Also in Spanish, “Resistiendo al terrorismo de Estado. Elaborar teorías sobre los colectivos de traductores e intérpretes activistas”, translated by Leticia Sánchez Balsalobre, in: BOÉRIE, J. & MAIER, C. (2009), *op. cit.*, 185-202; BAKER, Mona. (2006). “Translation and Activism. Emerging Patterns of Narrative Community”, *THE MASSACHUSETTS REVIEW*, 47 (III): 462-484; BAKER, Mona (2013). “Translation as An Alternative Space for Political Action” in *SOCIAL MOVEMENT STUDIES: JOURNAL OF SOCIAL, CULTURAL AND POLITICAL PROTEST* 12 (1): 23-47; among others.



ECOS, Babels, Tlaxcala, Traduttori per la Pace, Traducteurs sans Frontières/Translators Without Borders, Peace Brigades International, Front Line Defenders, Habitat International Coalition, Gush Shalom, The Israeli Peace Bloc, etc. Baker adopts the frame of social and communication theory and several times harks back to Margaret Somers, Gloria D. Gibson, Walter Fisher, Jerome Bruner, W. Lance Bennett and Murray Edelman, among others, not only to analyse such narratives, but also to show us two things: first, that the narratives at work in the process of translation (which are not solely those of the discipline itself, as many people believe, but also private ones, public ones, and metanarratives) play a part, on the one hand, in representing reality and, on the other hand, in constructing it; and second, that translators and interpreters have an essential role in the dissemination and consolidation of such narratives. Baker’s approach is very useful in analysing concepts like “neutrality,” “fidelity,” and “coherence,” which recur so often in the field of translation, and in applying them to new communities of translators and interpreters who openly declare their social activism. Ultimately, this approach leads Baker to call for a paradigm shift in the practice of T/I in defence of activist positions, sustaining her call to action on the conviction that

undermining existing patterns of domination cannot be achieved with concrete forms of activism alone (such as demonstrations, sit-ins, and civil disobedience) but must involve a direct challenge to the stories that sustain these patterns (Baker 2006: 474).

In her more recent writings, Baker is even clearer, if possible, on these issues, stating that the translator/interpreter not only never plays a neutral role in the process of translation, but that there does not, in fact, exist “liminal space between cultures and political divides” (Baker 2013: 23), since

translation as such does not mediate cultural encounters that exist outside the act of Translation but rather participates in producing those encounters. It does not reproduce texts but constructs cultural realities, and it does so by intervening in the



processes of narration and renarration that constitute all encounters. [...] It is not an innocent act of disinterested mediation but an important means of constructing identities (Baker 2013: 24).

Such a vision of the translator/interpreter as an agent—and no longer merely a volunteer on humanitarian grounds—is what underpins the activism that Baker espouses, along with an understanding of language and translation as a site of social resistance. Her activism is presented to us as an activity whose vocation is to re-narrate the world and promote social change “across linguistic and cultural borders” (ibid.) and which is, as a consequence, oriented toward intervention in the global political agenda.

Another approach to the topic is the one put forward by Michaela Wolf in many of her recent writings.<sup>4</sup> Wolf’s approach is more sociological in nature, whether based on the sociology of Bourdieu (fundamentally starting from the notion of *habitus*) or on the contribution of Postcolonial Studies to Translation Studies. Indeed, she argues for a clear paradigm shift in this discipline based on what she calls “the social/sociological turn”<sup>5</sup> (in parallel to “the cultural turn” of the nineties), taking the view that translation is primarily a social and cultural practice,<sup>6</sup> far removed from the idealistic view of translation as a “bridge between cultures.” Rather, her approach aims to address the process of translation from a transdisciplinary perspective, drawing on new

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<sup>4</sup> See WOLF, Michaela. (2010). “Translation ‘Going Social’? Challenges to the (Ivory) Tower of Babel”, *MonTI* 2: 29-46; and WOLF, Michaela. (2014). “The Sociology of Translation and its ‘Activist Turn’”, in: ANGELELLI, Claudia V. (ed.). *The Sociological Turn in Translation and Interpreting Studies*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 7-21.

<sup>5</sup> See WOLF 2014.

<sup>6</sup> See, among others, WOLF, Michaela. (2008). “Translation—Transculturation. Measuring the perspectives of transcultural political action”, in *TRANSVERSAL* (April 2008) Translated from German by Kate Sturge. In this paper, Wolf echoes the various critiques to the notion the Translation as an “in-between” or “third space” that exclude the ideological/political dimension of the translator.



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methodological tools.<sup>7</sup> In this respect, Wolf puts the emphasis basically on two aspects, as she explains below:

My focus will be on two issues: one is the question of ethical decisions which govern the translation practice and the translator’s behaviour, the other is the socio-political awareness as a key feature in viewing Translation as a social practice. (Wolf 2010: 34)

In addition to this recognition by Wolf, which leads us to question the translator’s supposed “neutrality” and “impartiality,” we must also add the current context of globalisation, which has contributed enormously to reshaping the role of the translator, since

Translation not only reflects and transfers existing knowledge, but continuously creates new knowledge, thus revealing its often neglected political and ideological dimension. Yet Translation can both promote asymmetrical power relations between languages or cultures and offer a form of resistance. (Wolf 2010: 38)

This is the basis for the activist dimension that, in her judgment, the activity of translation now possesses as a result of having attained a greater presence in the political arena, not only for the purpose of collaborating with social movements and NGOs, but also with the aim of directly promoting social change through the deployment of several strategies of resistance that challenge how exchanges (of information, of knowledge, etc.) are currently being carried out on the global stage. On this issue, Wolf contends that conflicts and tensions that have arisen (for example, between activist and volunteer translations on one side and professionals in translation and interpreting on the other)<sup>8</sup> are the result of

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<sup>7</sup> In 1998 Lawrence Venuti has already remarked that “any evaluation of a Translation Project must include a consideration of discursive strategies, their institutional settings, and their social functions and effects” (Venuti, 1998: 82).

<sup>8</sup> Wolf mentions explicitly the well-known discussions between the German interpreter Peter Naumann and Babels in 2005, in the World Social Forum, when



criteria that are not professional, but purely ideological and political. Accordingly, she advocates a notion of “ethics” in translation that is quite a long way from traditional approaches anchored in the principle of “fidelity.” Moreover, Wolf makes an unequivocal call for action in backing profound transformations in the teaching of translation/interpreting so as to provide new professionals in this field with the tools that are essential in our global time,<sup>9</sup> that is, “training them for society”:

Such a claim implies a series of profound transformations in existing curriculum programmes with particular focus on the inclusion of issues related to politics, ideology and sociology, among others, and thus constituting issues pertaining to any transcultural activity. (Wolf 2010: 43)

Her call to action (implicit in her invocation of “a scholarship with commitment”) is based on a theoretical foundation distinct from Baker’s —but, as we can see, it coincides in objectives and temporally with the theoretical foundation discussed earlier. In both cases, these scholars understand that translation/interpreting can function as a tool of social resistance in support of the emancipation and empowerment of minoritised languages and cultures, or languages that are disadvantaged in the context of globalisation.

Below are some examples of networks of activist translators/interpreters.

### **Activist Translation Networks**

In recent years, activist translation networks have increasingly aligned themselves with global movements of collective action. They are transnational communities, often “transprofessional”

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Naumann accused the interpreters working for Babels of lacking professionalism. See NAUMANN, Peter. (2005). “*Babels and Nomad: Observations on the barbarising of communication at the 2005 World Social Forum*”.

<<<http://aiic.eu/ViewPage.cfm/page1800.htm>>> (last access April 2017).

<sup>9</sup> “[W]hat is needed is a comprehensive methodological and theoretical framework to conceptualize the political field [...] of the translator” (Wolf 2014: 18).



and typically organised in a horizontal manner following a “networking logic”<sup>10</sup> (in the words of Juris). They are also networks that rely heavily on new technologies and are oriented toward undermining the linguistic hegemony of English through their commitment to language diversity.

Mona Baker clearly distinguishes two groups within these activist translation communities (BAKER 2013: 26), though both groups fall explicitly within the professional/academic area of translation:

- 1) “Groups whose activities predominantly revolve around the selection, translation and dissemination of written material via websites and mailing lists”;
- 2) “Groups whose work in the community and/or within collective forums—mainly the World Social Forum—and whose activities predominantly consist of interpreting oral interaction in specific events.”

Among the first group would be Traduttori per la Pace/Translators for Peace (founded in Italy in 1999), TUP (emerging in Japan in 2003); Tlaxcala (created in late 2005) and Translator Brigades (founded in September 2011). Not only are they dedicated to circulating written texts that they themselves select, but they also have an agenda clearly oriented toward spreading peace (especially in relation to certain military conflicts, such as the war in Kosovo for Traduttori per la Pace), except in the case of Tlaxcala and Translator Brigades, which are communities more oriented toward an activism aligned with the principles of the World Social Forum and anti-globalisation movements. In an analysis of these groups, it is important, on the one hand, to observe the direction of the translation and the relationship between different languages (Tlaxcala, for instance, strives to give voice to texts in other languages at the expense of English, “reversing the symbolic order by disrupting dominant patterns of

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<sup>10</sup> See JURIS, J. (2005). “Social Forums and their margins: Networking logics and the cultural politics of autonomous space”, *EPHEMERA*, 5 (2): 253-272.

translation flow” (Baker 2013: 43), and, on the other hand, to study their degree of awareness that they are taking part in a more far-reaching political project on the global agenda. Similarly, it is important to analyse their make-up (volunteers, amateurs, professional translators, etc.); their relationship with other professionals engaged in translation and interpretation; their objectives as activist translators; their organisational system and the presence or absence of an internal hierarchy; their process of selecting texts to translate; how decisions are made in their organisation; and so forth.

By contrast, the second group would include networks of translators who work primarily as interpreters at various forums. The clearest examples are ECOS (Translators and Interpreters for Solidarity) (founded in Granada in 1998 by lecturers and students connected to the Faculty of Translation at the University of Granada) and Babels (the largest and best-known network of translators, created in September 2002 by a group of activists affiliated with the French branch of ATTAC, with the aim of catering to the needs of the ESF in Florence). If ECOS is more closely related to academia, then Babels, by contrast, aspires to intervene directly in the political agenda and to play a much greater role in the anti-capitalist debate, based on the assumption that translation/interpreting has become a privileged site for political action in our time.

Whether the communities belong to the first group or the second one, it is necessary to analyse their own narratives and the degree of coherence that these narratives present.<sup>11</sup>

Here, the focus is primarily on two of these examples: Tlaxcala, representing the first group, and Babels, representing the second group.

- a. Tlaxcala, “the network of translators for linguistic diversity”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See Baker 2006.

is made up of roughly 50 translators from several countries, who have various specialities and work with less numerous languages than English in order to combat its “imperial” hegemony in the exchange of knowledge in our time. In particular, they seek to combat the large-scale dissemination of English terminology in the scientific area and in the transmission of news at the international level. Their approach is clearly anti-imperialist, as a response of “colonised” languages to “colonising” ones, based on this conviction: “Language [...] is also a weapon of acculturation for empires, even in the hands of the left” (TALENS 2009: 182).

Tlaxcala is dedicated strictly to written translation. The texts selected for translating vary widely. In general, Tlaxcala chooses texts that reflect the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In terms of communication media, the following sources are prominent: *Al Quds Al Arabi*, *LA Times*, *The Sunday Herald*, *Página 12*, and *Le Monde Diplomatique*.

In the area of copyright, the translations of Tlaxcala are marked *copyleft*, and their reproduction is free for non-commercial purposes, provided that the source is cited.

The origin of Tlaxcala was rather fortuitous. It came out of an interview conducted by Talens with Gilad Atzmon (a formerly Jewish musician and activist dedicated to the Palestinian struggle). The group was set up in late 2005, but it did not launch its website until February 21, 2006 ([www.tlaxcala.es](http://www.tlaxcala.es)). In the Tlaxcala Manifesto, the group set out a clear agenda: to fight against Zionism, Eurocentrism, colonialism, racism, the war on terror, and U.S. hegemony; and to

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<sup>12</sup> This is how its founder Manuel Talens defines it. See TALENS, Manuel. (2009). “Las lenguas de Tlaxcala: Pequeña historia de una larga marcha”. In: BOÉRIE, J. & MAIER, C. (eds.). *op. cit.*, 179-184.



fight for peace and equality among different languages and cultures. At present, Tlaxcala translates *to* and *from* 14 languages (Spanish, French, German, English, Italian, Portuguese, Catalan, Greek, Arabic, Swedish, Persian, Russian, Polish and Romanian). Its organisation is horizontal and anti-hierarchical.

Tlaxcala is the translator network with the most links to other activist groups, save for Babels: for example, its translations sometimes circulate on lists of activists (such as “Academics for Justice”).

- a. Babels, “the international network of volunteer interpreters and translators” is by far the best known of these networks. It emerged in embryonic form in 2001 at the first World Social Forum in Porto Alegre (Brazil), but it was not actually founded until the organisation of the first European Social Forum in Florence (2002), when the prevailing trend to hire interpreters was broken. At first, it was a small network of activists affiliated with the French branch of ATTAC (the Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions to Aid Citizens), who insisted at the time that the forum should turn to volunteer interpreters and not professional ones. The idea caught on, and various branches of Babels emerged in different countries (Italy, France, Spain, and the United Kingdom) as part of a horizontally organised (non-hierarchical) network with non-permanent structures, which shared a few of the same objectives: linguistic activism and contributing to the political debate on the global agenda. Since its very inception, therefore, Babels has not been a provider of language services, but rather a “political agent.”

An important moment in the trajectory of Babels was the organisation of the fourth European Social Forum, held in Athens in 2005, which heralded the



network’s geographic expansion into the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans. This growth brought not only the incorporation of many other clearly minority (and minoritised) languages, but also the challenge that all this posed to Babels to maintain and deepen the principles that it had championed from the outset. At this point, Babels decided to foster the formation of a group of volunteers to create the Alternative Interpretation System (ALIS) based on radio frequencies. Additionally, it rejected the hiring of professional interpreters, who were replaced through the collaboration of hundreds of volunteers (not necessarily activists) recruited by the organisation for the Athens event (just as had already happened at the World Social Forum in Bombay in 2004). This was a large-scale interpreting service and it was the result of a clearly political decision, which had important consequences on the relationship between Babels and professional interpreters and which affected the quality of the interpreting on offer. It is also the origin of the well-known dispute sparked by a German professional interpreter, Peter Naumann, who harshly criticised Babels in 2005 in the online journal *COMMUNICATE!* published by AIIC (the International Association of Conference Interpreters). Naumann denounced “the barbarising of communication at the 2005 World Social Forum”,<sup>13</sup> and, therefore, the lack of professionalism of the Babels interpreters, taking what was clearly an ideological and political stance, not one involving professional ethics. Altvater, for instance, responded as follows:

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<sup>13</sup> See NAUMANN, Peter. (2005). “Babels and Nomad: Observations on the barbarising of communication at the 2005 World Social Forum”. <<<http://aiic.eu/ViewPage.cfm/page1800.htm>>> (last access April 2017).



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The question of translating is much more than a technical question. It is a major political issue. The open area of a World Social Forum can be filled politically only [...] if the communication between 150.000 people from 135 countries is established (Altvater 2005, *apud* Wolf 2010: 41).<sup>14</sup>

The debate over the quality of interpreting by non-professional activist interpreters has given rise to many studies, with some arguing that “the quality of the interpreting must not be looked at solely by observing the process and product in terms of professional expertise, standards and training, but must also be expanded to include socio-political factors”.<sup>15</sup>

In conclusion, the social face of Translation/Interpreting is on the rise in recent years as a result of the networks of activist translators discussed above. These positions are affecting the very practice of Translation/Interpreting by challenging the tools that are used, the conditions in which the practice is carried out, and the norms that are adopted. The commitment of the translators and interpreters involved (whether professionals or amateurs) assumes that translation—and by extension language, in general—has an undeniable power to transform society and that the practice of Translation/Interpreting can be undertaken as a labour

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<sup>14</sup> ALTVATER, Elmar. (2005). “Das grosse Treffen. Beobachtungen auf dem Weltsozialforum von Porto Alegre 2005”. <<<http://www.weltsozialforum.org/2005/2005.wsf.1/2005.wsf.meldungen/news.2005.22>>> (last access April 2017). Translated into English by Michaela Wolf in: WOLF, Michaela. (2010). “Translation ‘going social’? Challenges to the (ivory) tower of Babel”, *MonTi*, 2: 29-46.

<sup>15</sup> This is the position of Pöchhacker in PÖCHHACKER, Franz. (2004). *Introducing Interpreting Studies*, London/New York: Routledge; *apud* LAMPROPOULOU, Anastasia. (2009). “La política de interpretación de Babels en el Foro Social Europeo de Atenas: un enfoque sociopolítico de la interpretación”. In: BOÉRIE, J. & MAIER, C., *op. cit.*, 203-213.



of social resistance in support of human rights, in the anti-globalisation struggle, and to promote peace.

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**Abstract:**

Assuming that Translation and Interpretation (T/I) are never politically neutral “bridge-building” practices, we can consider them as political activities —either explicitly or implicitly— especially in those contexts marked by social conflict, where the implication for professional practice should compel necessarily an ethical commitment from translators/interpreters.

From that point of view, this paper deals with the social movements, groups, communities, and networks that support T/I practice from social justice, humanitarian, and mostly volunteer organizations (such as ECOS, Babel, Tlaxcala, Translators Without Borders, Translators for Peace, Translators and Interpreters Peace Network, and so on), acting outside the dominant political agenda as a form of social activism. We will study the way participation in



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T/I as volunteering impacts the professional practice, the role that those T/I communities of resistance have played in social activism, as well as the potential of T/I in social change, political activism, and the politics of immigration and asylum.

**Key words:** Social Translation, Activism, Translation Networks

AL MARGEN DE LA AGENDA POLÍTICA DOMINANTE: LAS REDES DE TRADUCCIÓN E INTERPRETACIÓN PARA EL ACTIVISMO SOCIAL

**Resumen:**

Asumiendo que la Traducción e Interpretación (T/I) nunca son prácticas políticamente neutrales de "construcción de puentes", podemos considerarlas como actividades políticas, ya sea explícita o implícitamente, especialmente en aquellos contextos marcados por conflictos sociales, donde la implicación para la práctica profesional debería obligar necesariamente a un compromiso ético por parte de los traductores / intérpretes.

Desde ese punto de vista, este documento trata de los movimientos sociales, grupos, comunidades y redes que apoyan la práctica T/I desde justicia social, organizaciones humanitarias y en su mayoría voluntarias (como ECOS, Babel, Tlaxcala, Traductores sin Fronteras, Traductores). para Peace, Translators and Interpreters Peace Network, etc.), actuando fuera de la agenda política dominante como una forma de activismo social. Estudiaremos la forma en que la participación en T/I como voluntario impacta la práctica profesional, el papel que esas comunidades de resistencia T/I han jugado en el activismo social, así como el potencial de T/I en el cambio social, el activismo político y la política de inmigración y asilo.

**Palabras clave:** Traducción social, Activismo, Redes de traducción.

