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LEONARDO THINKS

Opinion: Translation Discussion: Michael Punt, Roger Malina and Martin Zierold: Part I: How much for a bad translation? by Michael Punt

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As we are preparing to go to press with this edition of Leonardo Reviews Quarterly an article in a reasonably respectable UK newspaper (Guardian, 15.04.11) quotes from the Association of American Publishers' report that total e-book sales in the US in February was \$90.3 million. They compare this with the figure for paperback sales in the same period of \$81.2 million. This article is headlined: 'E-book sales pass another milestone. Electronic books have become the largest single format in the US for the first time, new data reveals.' Four paragraphs into the article, however, it becomes clear that the overall trade in print books is still bigger than the e-market and that the most bullish prediction for parity in the US market is around 2014/15. (For a full account of these statistics see: International Digital Publishing Forum <http://idpf.org/about-us/industry-statistics>).

Undoubtedly there are new distribution and publishing opportunities opened up by the growing ubiquity of Internet connection and cheaper hardware production. But, according to figures from *Internet World Stats*, in June 2010 there are 6.8 billion people in the world and 2 billion of these (28.7%) are connected to the Internet, 13% of them live in North America, 24.2% in Europe and 42% in Asia. While the penetration rate of Internet usage is highest in North America (77%) the numbers involved are relatively low (on a global scale) and since the near saturation the potential for growth is much lower in the USA than in Europe or Asia. (<http://www.internetworldstats.com/>).

To put the headline into another perspective it is worth visiting what exactly the Association of American Publishers (which comprises less than 300 US book publishers – there are about 4,000 listed at <http://www.lights.ca/publisher/>) posted on their website on 14.04.11. Their press release stated under the modest banner 'Popularity of Books in Digital Platforms Continues to Grow, According to AAP Publishers February 2011 Sales Report' was that: 'This one-month surge is primarily attributed to a high level of strong post-holiday e-book buying, or "loading", by consumers who received e-reader devices as gifts.' Experts note that the expanded selection of e-



readers introduced for the holidays and the broader availability of titles are both factors. (<http://www.publishers.org/press/30/>)

However, by the 18th of April the headline 'E-book Sales surpass paper book' was all across the Internet (and some print journals) and will no doubt find its way into some academic conference calls and papers. Whilst it is understandable that vested interests such as G8 media outlets, including newspaper and book distributors, might 'spin' the story to suggest that the USA market is synonymous with the global market, and that the marketing category 'paperback' is in some way an equivalent to the semantic concept of 'books' from the point of view of the arts, sciences and humanities, these connotations need to be examined carefully and where appropriate challenged.

Alas the enthusiasm for a view of culture driven by technology encourages the slippage in translation between journalism and scholarship. The rhetoric surrounding the e-book publicity is inviting and is reminiscent of similar poor analysis in Games Studies in the mid-nineties. The apparently significant milestone of games sales overtaking cinema theatrical ticket sales was uncritically repeated (often by senior academics) in a way that suggested that the 'games industry' was now bigger than the cinema. Such naivety about the economics of media distribution was itself a repetition of the vapourware that surrounded the CD-ROM, which was going to close libraries etc. What damaged the possibility of CD-Rom media development was arguably the rhetoric, which raised consumer expectations of content, which the storage media was not able to deliver. And whilst objections to the euphoria are often not well received, or regarded as mere antediluvian pedantry, what is at stake in this slippage is not just poor scholarship but, as in the case of CD-Rom and to some extent DVD, a failure to exploit creative opportunity. Moreover there is also the loss of quite precise terms that may not have relevance to one community but are still of crucial interest to another. Whilst the term library may mean no more than a collection of texts that can be digitally stored, for another community it is a collection of books that are catalysts for knowledge transfer activities requiring human interaction. Similarly the term 'book', as it was understood in the context of print on paper, may be a redundancy to some people in the world who in John Betjeman's famous poem Slough 'do not know/The birdsong from the radio', for the 89.9 % of Africans, and 79.8% of Asians not connected to the Internet, its meaning is attached to libraries and shelves (and human interaction) rather than the procedures of patent Optical Character Reading software and data dumps. These two meanings are not synonymous: books do not fit into hard drives--only a reduced version of their text and images is amenable to such reduction. A reduction that reverses the technological logic of print, which has enabled the progressive reduction of error as each new edition corrected flaws in the previous. OCR and even multiple human transcriptions methods return us to the age of hand written texts in which each iteration introduces new error. (For an example see the discussion concerning Google Ngrams viewer based on Google Books.)

These objections and cautions against overstatement of the potential of a new form of distribution may seem pedantic and obvious, but in the enthusiasm of the moment or the opportunity what is lost in translation can be overlooked. The social and economic impact of extrapolating from the translation of local and economically privileged interpretation of a noun as a key to developing a global policy for knowledge transfer needs to be measured against the values



and ethics of artists, scientists and those in the humanities whose primary interest is global enfranchisement through shared knowledge.

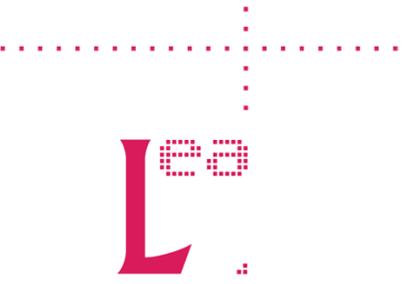
Language and meaning is always alive and dynamic and constantly changing and for this reason the cultural turn in translation studies that Roger Malina outlines in his editorial in this issue is a crucial move. Leonardo Reviews Quarterly is not printed and consequently the claim of it 'going to press' is a transfer from an earlier technology and not entirely appropriate (and I apologize for slack language). LRQ does have an irreversible moment when we commit the text to publication but unlike the print magazine its published form can be modified at will. However, the use of the old media term is exemplary of the ways in which a close study of translation through cultural filters can offer a new archaeology yielding insight into difference across time and communities, mindsets and value systems. It can also have a determining impact on pressing contemporary issues as key terms that shape our values and are redefined by quite local but economically powerful influential interests. For example the ubiquity of 'social networking' as a term associated with a product has altered the concept of social which excludes the more difficult negotiations between unequal communities ranging from the management of shyness at a personal level to the exclusion of 98% of Africans 93% of Asian and 94% of the inhabitants of the Middle East from the Facebook 'social' network. Given such limitations what can the term 'social' mean in its new translation?

Another is that as a consequence of this new translation, which redefines the market place (or excludes the disenfranchised) Facebook's profits are likely to yield \$1billion this year http://www.businessweek.com/technology/content/jan2011/tc2011016_998330.htm Supported by collaboration from the media conglomerates whose investment is in distribution, rather than content, these vast sums were made in the slippage between the poor (by which I mean willfully limited) translation of 'social' and 'network'. Perhaps the most serious consequence of drawing an equivalence between a marketing term and a concept that travels across and between languages nuanced by cultural context in this case is that there is a slippage between social as something to do with collective interaction to something that involves a mere 30 million users. If the Facebook translation of 'social' becomes the dominant default, how, for example, will users of the term understand issues such as global malnutrition, big oil or the impact of climate change?

One can only welcome the 'Translational Turn' (although perhaps a better term than 'turn' could be found), and as a reviews project Leonardo Reviews and Leonardo Reviews Quarterly will be paying special attention to it in the coming months particularly in its capacity to alert us to the consequences for the disenfranchised of poor translation.

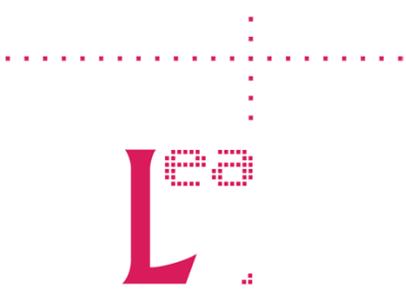
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