



Introduction to Special Issue on Social Justice and Translation in Technical Communication

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[Technical Communication & Social Justice, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2023, pp. 1-7.](#)

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When you think about, read, or hear the word “translation,” what comes to mind?

For some, translation is the process of making information more widely accessible by replacing words in one language with words in another language. Many people have read translated books, used digital translation tools on a trip abroad, or perhaps read translated documents in various contexts for different reasons. While all of these interpretations of translation are accurate in their own way, when multilingual people, and especially multilingual people who have learned to navigate the world in a language that is new to them, think about, read, or hear the word “translation,” many of us are immediately transported to particular experiences that have shaped our identities.

When hearing the word “translation,” multilingual people may think, for example, about the days we spent going to doctors’ visits with our parents, translating information from English into our home languages to try and help our parents stay safe and healthy. We might remember the process of migrating to a new country, learning to make our mouths move in ways that felt foreign or strange. We might think about, and physically feel, the anxiety we still experience when having to advocate for ourselves and our loved ones in a language that is not our own. We might recall the comfort and love we feel when we can express ourselves freely with people who understand our home language, without needing to mask or translate our emotions.

For multilingual people, translation is much more than an abstract practice. It is an embodied experience that holds multiple memories of struggle, joy, pain, and much more. For communities who have to rely on translation to access information, particularly in a country that continues to uphold Western, white languages and people as the standard, translation can also be a form of resistance, a tool for liberation, and a way to build community by speaking through “a collective voice” (Rivera, 2022). Translation is also understanding how the same language can undergo metamorphoses in the mouths of the marginalized, giving words new meaning and life as a means of survival amidst the dominance of whiteness; it is also sometimes just a glance, a shared understanding unspoken, communicated across and between the spaces given. It is coding and switching, remixing and reworking the language of dominance to reinforce subversive actions needed to shift towards change.

Translation in Technical and Professional Communication

Understanding the work of translation in Technical and Professional Communication (TPC) requires an acknowledgement of the miscommunications, misrepresentations, and misunderstandings that can occur when faced with the delicate nuances of transforming information from one language to another, one locale to another, one culture to another. As people who often struggle to find the right words to communicate in the languages we know, the work of translation extends itself into understanding that there are implications to what you share and what is heard/understood. Translation work, then, is an opportunity for us to make language more than a receptacle for information and instruction. Translation becomes the vehicle of possibility in cross-cultural understanding, a way to “speak and interpret *with* the community, not just *for* the community, or *about* the community” (emphasis orig, Royster, 2000, p.275). As Nora K. Rivera (2022) explains in her work with Indigenous interpreters and translators, “Spanish or English terms do not often have Indigenous equivalents that can be interpreted with

one word or even one phrase. Many times, Indigenous interpreters draw on the Indigenous practice of dialogue to explain highly technical concepts” (n. pag.). Therefore, understanding the intricacies of translation requires working with, rather than trying to speak for, multilingual communities.

This special issue stems from this space of complexity—one that grapples with how translation in technical communication necessitates an attunement to power structures, positionalities, and orientations. As many technical communication scholars have already demonstrated, translation in technical communication is an intricate practice that requires extensive collaboration between technical communicators, translators, designers, and multilingual communities (Agboka, 2013; Walton, Zraly, and Mugengana, 2015; Maylath, Muñoz Martín, and Pacheco Pinto, 2015; Rivera, 2022). While the goal of technical communication is often to simplify complex information, as Natasha N. Jones and Miriam F. Williams (2018) argue, (over) simplification can also flatten difference and erase the “more sinister and cynical purposes for communication design” (p. 372). For example, when we seek to simplify the translation process by reducing translation to the mere adaptation of words from one language to another, or when we as technical communicators choose to outsource translation to a third party without taking up some of the translation labor or becoming informed about what it takes to make information accessible to a new audience in a new language, we can risk erasing the people, cultures, experiences, and the work that makes multilingual communication happen in today’s globalized world. As Halcyon Lawrence (2020) demonstrates, translation not only encompasses the transformation of words from one language to another, but also necessitates an awareness of racial biases embedded in emerging technologies and in the processes we as technical communicators use to develop, test, design, and share our work.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the need to further consider how translation and technical communication should further intersect with social justice. As COVID misinformation spread through white supremacist media, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) across the globe organized to translate, transcreate, and localize materials to keep their communities safe. For example, the Centro Profesional Indígena de Asesoría, Defensa, y Traducción, an Indigenous rights organization in Oaxaca de Juárez, Oaxaca, Mexico, developed a campaign titled, [“Los Derechos Viven en Todas Las Lenguas” \(Our Rights Live in All Languages\)](#), where they translated and localized COVID-19 related information for Indigenous language speakers in Mexico. “Standard” protocols like social distancing and washing your hands consistently are not feasible for intergenerational homes with little access to water. Thus, translating technical information about disease treatment and prevention needs to account for linguistic and cultural differences and for the ways in which structural oppression permeates all facets of society.

Another example: In the United Kingdom, healthcare professionals of Somali background began to witness an alarming rate of Somali patients in their wards, and an increase in mortality rates within the community during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. They started asking how information was circulating in the UK Somali diaspora, and considering what was leading to spikes in patients needing care and support. What they determined was that the information being created by the UK National Health Service (NHS) to educate the community was not reaching the older populations of the diaspora. Instead, these populations were finding more misinformation being widely shared across the community via the messaging platform,

WhatsApp. In order to combat this misinformation being widely shared across the global Somali diaspora, Somali-women healthcare professionals in the UK started asking questions about where Somalis were being informed about COVID-19. Even though the NHS had created many materials for dissemination via social media apps, many were not translated into Somali. The NHS were also hosting Zoom webinars with translation available, without realizing that much of the community was not accessing the information being shared because of the way it was being shared. Somali women healthcare workers (doctors, nurses, anesthesiologists) took it upon themselves to change that by working together to make materials that could be more widely shared via WhatsApp for elders in the community.

These are just two examples of the type of work we sought to highlight in this special issue: examples of how translation can serve as a tool for social justice when it is guided by the embodied experiences of multilingual communities. Following the ongoing social justice turn in technical communication, which highlights how technical communicators can intervene in injustices by amplifying the already-existing and ongoing efforts of marginalized communities (Shelton, 2020; Walton, Moore, Jones, 2019), we position translation as one avenue through which technical communication scholars, teachers, and practitioners can shape how meaning is transformed.

Article Summaries

The articles in this special issue (Part 1 of 2) take up the challenge of embracing complexity in technical communication through the intersections of translation and social justice. In soliciting articles for this special issue, we focused on work that recognizes translation, like all technical communication, is not neutral, but is instead always embedded within power structures situated within and across communities. We solicited work that connected translation, and language more broadly, to the communities using these tools to foster social justice and reject white supremacist practices.

To this end, our special issue opens with Edzordzi Agbozo's "Software-Mediated Diarrhea Localization: Reflections from a Transnational Locus." Through autoethnography, Agbozo illustrates how software-mediated localization in healthcare can erase the cultural nuances of language. Agbozo examines the Wikipedia Diarrhea localization Project (WDP), a project intended to translate and localize public health information about diarrhea into Ewe, a member of the Gbe sub-group of the Kwa branch of the Niger-Congo language family. He illustrates how software-mediated localization in the WDP rendered ineffective translations of health information. Agbozo then argues that "global designers of localization software—and technical communicators in general—could redress the challenges of power in multilingual meaning-making by seeing their work as part of a vigilant *public intellectual practice* that must be liquid, iterative, and regenerative."

As illustrated by Agbozo, many of the contributors to this special issue utilize their own multilingual expertise to provide rigorous reviews of emerging technologies and digital translation software. For example, the next article in the special issue is, "Accessibility and Contribution Limitations of Authoritative Climate Information: Evaluating The Usability and Inclusivity of IPCC's Website" by YoonJi Kim. In this article, Kim conducts a user analysis and

usability test of ipcc.ch: Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), a climate change information website. Using her expertise and positionality “a multilingual technical communication and climate communication scholar with over a decade of living experience in various countries outside the U.S.,” Kim outlines the limitations of the IPCC website, pointing to how a lack of awareness and implementation of culturally-driven translation strategies prevents information about climate change from being accessible to multilingual audiences through the IPCC website. As Kim concludes, “Website improvements should consider not just the experts for translation but the needs of non-experts and non-Western users.”

The issue continues with “An Integrative Literature Review of Translation in Technical and Professional Communication,” by Keshab R. Acharya and Isidore K. Dorpenyo. Acharya and Dorpenyo review literature about translation within the field of TPC. As the authors point out, “despite growing interests in translating for global reach within technical and professional communication (TPC), no cohesive literature review accounts for this new growth.” The authors use grounded theory and content analysis to review scholarship published in five major TPC journals between 1990 and 2022. Through this synthesis, Acharya and Dorpenyo argue that TPC researchers and practitioners need to adopt more justice-driven research frameworks to better understand the complexities of translation for culturally localized usability, especially in multilingual, multicultural global contexts.

Next, in “‘Descendants of Survivors’: Tensions in Translating COVID-19 Vaccine Promotion Videos in Hawai‘i,” Rosanna M. Vail continues pointing to the limitations of simplistic translation processes. Vail “examines video transcripts from a Hawai‘i-based collaborative encouraging Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders toward safe health practices and COVID-19 vaccination,” noting issues that arose in communicating COVID-19 information across languages. Importantly, Vail highlights how her own positionality in this project both fostered and limited her ability to contribute to successful translation practices. As Vail explains, this project illustrates “how positionality may complicate the pursuit or articulation of research, providing transparency for scholars launching into translation-based technical communication projects.”

With continued attunement to positionality, the issue continues with Joe Wilson’s “Translation’s Value to Queer Orientations to Technical Communication: On Claims to Interpretive Authority.” In this article, Wilson “traces how technical communicators and scholars across both queer studies and trans* studies have adopted a relational approach to translation that foregrounds the often messy, embodied negotiations of agency and power that occur as meaning is transformed across language representations and genres.” Through this analysis, Wilson pushes scholars who work in technical communication and translation to further engage technical genres ongoing across both queer and trans* studies. Wilson notes that the labor of translation is inherently interdisciplinary, and that further transdisciplinary connections that centralize queer and trans experiences are much-needed in the field.

Continuing an emphasis on interdisciplinarity and collaboration beyond labels and boundaries, in “The Problem with Common Ground: Translation and Colonial Logics in the ‘Imiloa Astronomy Center Online Interface,” Matt Homer presents his interface analysis of the ‘Imiloa website, a site where “the ‘Imiloa Astronomy Center attempts common ground with Native Hawaiians who

protect Mauna a Wākea from occupation by astronomical research.” Through this analysis, Homer argues that “the ‘Imiloa interface creates a colonial user experience by translating Hawaiian knowledge into Eurowestern frames of knowledge.” Homer thus illustrates how translation and localization processes can perpetuate, rather than redress, oppression when they are applied through Western perspectives.

While many of the articles in this special issue highlight translation in industry contexts, we are so glad to also be able to showcase how translation frameworks are applied in TPC pedagogy focused on social justice. Our special issue concludes with, “‘Does it have to be in English?’: Decolonizing TPC Pedagogies with Community-based Translation” by Francis Macarthy, Cristina Sánchez-Martín, and Josephine Walwema. In this article, the authors put translation studies into conversation with community-engaged social justice work in TPC. They showcase how students in an introductory TPC course engage with community-engagement projects that highlight the importance of translation. Through this work, Mccarthy, Sánchez-Martín, and Walwema argue that as TPC teachers continue engaging with social justice frameworks, centralizing the linguistic diversity of our students and communities is critical in expanding our students’ awareness of what contemporary TPC entails.

Conclusion

From dreaming up this special issue with the *Technical Communication and Social Justice* journal editors, to discussing our plan with the editorial board, to drafting up a CFP and receiving so many amazing proposals, the entire experience of putting this issue together has echoed support for the growing need to consider TPC praxis beyond white-English. The authors in this collection centralize their positionalities in engaging with translation research. This emphasis on identity is not always embraced in technical communication or in translation studies, as both fields have historically pretended there is a “neutral” and “objective” approach to communication. However, by highlighting social justice as the ultimate goal of translation and technical communication in this special issue, we were able to recognize how positionality influences all communication, and how, rather than ignoring our identities, we can acknowledge who we are, where we come from, and how our worldview and experiences will undoubtedly shape how we communicate with others. Translation can be interpreted literally or metaphorically, and it can be defined in multiple ways depending on context. Our goal was to centralize lived experience as a critical component in social justice research that expands beyond linguistic boundaries. We’re very thankful to all of our contributors, reviewers, editors, and, most importantly, to the students and community members who continue shaping this work. Stay tuned for the second part of this issue, where we will continue expanding these conversations.

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