

"The Limits of My Language Mean the Limits of My World": Is Machine Translation a Cultural Threat to Anyone?

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Cultural relativism is not the only, or even primary, way to interpret “the limits of my language”: but, for Wittgenstein, ironically, the limits are shown to be his failure to recognize the existence of different languages. This view, which could be termed “cultural universalism”, is typical of Western philosophers. It relies implicitly on the thesis that all languages are inter-translatable; hence any message is separable from the language that carries it.

(Another irony: for a literary text, Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* is surprisingly susceptible to Machine Translation.)

Substantial inter-translatability is an amazing, possibly defining, property of human languages. Contrast other distinctively human cultural practices, such as music, dance, graphic arts, whose semantics are not propositional, hence not susceptible to translation.

But contrast the thesis that all languages are inter-translatable with the maxim that poetry is what gets lost in translation. This latter recognizes the distinctive texture in each language. [This is explored at length in Hofstadter 1997.]

This texture can and does give rise to different strategies for expressing a single reality. [This is demonstrated in Pederson et al., 1998.] What is expressed in practice, therefore, needs to be distinguished from what is in principle expressible. This sets limits on our belief in universal applicability of Machine Translation. (Such a belief would be an extreme form of cultural universalism.)

Unquestioning belief in the universal applicability of Machine Translation can be culturally dangerous. There are at least five ways in which MT can be a cultural threat.

1. *By revealing secrets* Languages are not universally accessible, and human cultures have always relied on this for the filtering of information to appropriate audiences. Consider the restriction of certain languages to initiates, and traditional uses for “the decent obscurity of a classical language”. Compare their absence with the proliferation of pornography.
2. *By making linguistic skills and culture obsolete*
If conversion between languages is mechanical, appreciation of expressive quality of distinct languages will cease to be important.
3. *By devaluing the skill and art of translators* Similarly, conscious contrastive knowledge of these qualities of languages will lose its value.
4. *By misrepresenting the content, and value, of what is translated* Those reliant on translated messages will be vulnerable to mistranslations which may mislead. They will also tend to make judgements on the value of the message without knowledge of, or interest in, the original.
5. *By re-drawing the boundaries of language use* This is increasingly a feature of our world, as languages are used through language technology. One aspect of these re-drawn

boundaries may be increasing acceptance and currency of inexact or incoherent text in commercial uses (occasionally even enforced through "Controlled Languages")- Another is that traditional, initiatory, uses of languages with a high level of personal interaction (e.g. within the family, school) are seen as less important. This is a particular problem for denizens of smaller language communities, but is not exclusive to them.

These problems and threats are not unique to language. Similar difficulties emerge in any context where wider knowledge becomes more easily available, essentially in any context of exploration, or revelation. The benefits of this are potentially to broaden experience and average cultural horizons, which can deepen understanding through making possible contrasts, comparisons and constitutive analyses. The corresponding risks lie in cheapening, i.e. diminishing respect for, the knowledge gained. In extreme cases, the fact that there has been new knowledge here is forgotten or denied, eliminating the possibility of others' learning from their own encounter with such new things. And there is also the deadly possibility (seen for example in advance of European conquest in the Americas) that those who had relied exclusively on what is being explored or revealed will simply be sacrificed.

Such remedies as there are for these cultural threats can lie in discretion and keeping a low profile. Cultures can survive through putting off the challenge of direct contact (as Japan did for over two centuries, and some small communities in America and Asia are still doing).

But in the longest run, there is no hiding place, no "decent obscurity". When this contact occurs, the solution must come through action, to create new and different complexities consciously through knowledge of differences. This is the antithesis of consumer, assimilationist, culture. This constructive action can be promoted through preserving and a developing a conscious respect for others' complexities and mysteries.

References

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