The Routledge Handbook of Translation Technology and Society

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First published 2025

ISBN: 978-1-032-22142-7 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-032-22143-4 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-003-27131-4 (ebk)

Chapter 1

Translation and Digital Capitalism

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DOI: 10.4324/9781003271314-3

The funder of the Open Access version of this Chapter 1 is Styrian Provincial Government, Department for Economy, Tourism, Science and Research.

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

1

TRANSLATION AND DIGITAL CAPITALISM

Stefan Baumgarten

Introduction

We live in an unequal corporate world troubled by endemic exploitation. We also live in the Anthropocene, an era named after us humans, as we keep doing our best to ruin this planet's natural resources. Symbolic power is held by national governments, yet real power is held by the financial aristocracy who keep accumulating the biggest shares in economic capital. David R. Boyd, professor for environmental law and outgoing UN rapporteur for the environment and human rights recently delivered an urgent message to the world:

> I started out six years ago talking about the right to a healthy environment having the capacity to bring about systemic and transformative changes. But this powerful human right is up against an even more powerful force in the global economy, a system that is absolutely based on the exploitation of people and nature. And unless we change that fundamental system, then we're just re-shuffling deck chairs on the Titanic.
>
> (Lakhani 2024, n. p.)

The reader may wonder why this paper begins with a lamentation on the world's apparent wickedness, rather than with a detached introduction on translation's role in the global political economy. A polemical broadside, I contend, may highlight three *relational* categories – ideology, politics, nature – for a critical study of translation technologies, global inequality, and exploitation. The main line of argument will be framed alongside an idealist narrative of "*relatedness* and interdependence" (Cronin 2020: 518; emphasis added). A holistic outlook on the ethics of translation and its technological gadgetry takes issue with the empirical-descriptivist and business-oriented mainstream in technology-oriented translation studies.

More than 100 years ago, the German activist Gustav Landauer argued for a radical reform of our aberrant civilisation, through "a return to nature, a re-endowment with spirit, [and] a regaining of relationships" (1911: 136). It might appear ironic to invoke radicalism for what some consider common sense, though Landauer's critique neatly illustrates the widening relational gulf between nature, the spiritual world and humanity. Technological progress has driven societal evolution since time immemorial, with information and communication technologies having a particularly

DOI: 10.4324/9781003271314-3

significant impact on societies and cultures. In the world of translation, too, commercial and above all freely available AI-based translation tools are having a disruptive influence on transcultural communication barely imaginable only a few years ago. This is causing a gradual shift in thinking about the relationship between translation and technology, as the easy accessibility of automatic translation tools pushes scholars to acknowledge their increasing cultural, societal, and economic impact. The historical trajectory of translation studies itself is increasingly guided by the recognition that "[i]ts struggle for disciplinary emancipation, the cultural and the social turn, can only be properly understood against this heteronomous background brought about by the digital computer" (Rozmysłowicz 2024: 2).

This contribution provides a critical-holistic outlook on translation technology under the *ideological* regime of digital capitalism, it discusses translation's fate in the global *political* economy and it challenges the violation of *natural* rights in an extractivist and exploitative global industrial landscape. As a professional activity, translation and its technologies are linked to the exchange mechanisms of a globalised service and commodity market that functions within unequal relations of production, dissemination, and consumption. This chapter adopts a critical perspective on translation technology, beginning with an outline of the relationship between digital capitalism and ideology (section 1), followed by a discussion of the exploitation of translation labour in the political economy (section 2), before concluding with an idealist tale about translation technology in a shared global collective envisaged by Hardt and Negri (2004) as the multitude (section 3).

Digital capitalism and ideology

Today's dominant global ideology is capitalism. The eminent economic historian Ellen Meiksins Wood describes capitalism as "a system in which all economic actors" have to rely "upon the market for their most basic needs" (2003: 9). The dependency upon the power of globalised markets to ensure survival is a distinguishing feature of modern life. From the medieval market to today's digitally interconnected stock exchange, many markets have shifted from the material world to the virtual reality of immaterial exchange. The stakeholders in digital capitalism are dependent upon a marketplace that is inextricably linked to the (im)material circuitry of capital, labour, services, and commodities. The metamorphosis of translation and its digital tools from materially tangible media into the virtual cyberspace of today's information society is in full flow (Littau 2016). Three sociocognitive concepts from critical theory may help us grasp the ideological linkage between translation, capitalism, and technology: these are *instrumental reason*, *technological determinism,* and *commodification*.

Capital and instrumental reason

The Enlightenment and industrial-scientific revolutions led to material progress but not necessarily to social progress. The power of reason and technology has eliminated much unnecessary toil and suffering, but it also brought about the atomic bomb. This basic contradiction represents the central line of argument in Adorno and Horkheimer's (1947/2002) influential work *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where they identify *instrumental reason* as a potent manifestation of social power, in fact as the prevailing mode of thinking that has come to colonise humanity's relations among themselves and with the rest of the world. According to Bronner, "[i]nstrumental rationality employs a mathematically defined notion of efficiency predicated upon rendering all tasks routine" (2011: 42), hence it bears considerable practical consequences for science, technology, trade, and the economy in a capitalist world order destined for profit, growth, and exploitation. One might

think that instrumental thinking remains confined mainly to the so-called hard sciences but also in translation studies, as suggested by Dizdar, "the dominance of the market and its role in the shaping of university programmes has become ever more obvious" while "[i]n the case of translation technologies there is an obvious imbalance between instrumentally oriented and critical research" (2014: 210). The profit-driven translation industry itself presents formidable challenges to those seeking to counteract instrumental rationality and promote more ethical, human-centred practices, largely due to the success of AI-driven translation machines, an increase in translation labour platforms, and ever more sophisticated digital translation workflows (Fırat 2021; Giustini 2024).

A parallel challenge emerges in the concept of *capital* itself, which embodies the values accrued by people competing in commodity and service markets. Bourdieu's (1983) theory of capital has been highly influential in the sociology of translation, not least, because it provides an adaptable matrix for transcultural analysis and comparison (e.g., Sapiro 2014; Hanna 2016). Capital, according to Bourdieu, manifests itself as "accumulated labour", and it can be differentiated alongside cultural, social, and economic capital. The least tangible yet most significant is the fourth type of capital, symbolic capital, "as it is represented, i.e., apprehended symbolically, in a relationship of knowledge or, more precisely, of misrecognition and recognition" (1983: 241, 255). Symbolic capital, in other words, represents people's underlying ideologies and social attitudes, their tacit knowledge about the cultural, social, and economic constitution of markets. In digital capitalism, knowledge and information serve as the main currencies in the processes of capital accumulation, resulting in the generation, maintenance, and reproduction of data as the new gold standard (Couldry and Mejias 2019; Ibrahim 2021). In the translation industry, technology developers, language service providers (LSPs), translators, and clients co-opt in the generation of digital translation workflows distinguished by an increasing mathematical precision. Joss Moorkens reports that "there is growing evidence of automatic job allocation or limitations to online translation job availability based on previous performance" (2024: 483). After having been assessed by (algorithmic) performance indicators, once translators embark on the job itself, they connect with, or, more precisely, become entrenched within online digital hyperspace via an interlocked toolbox of translation memories, terminology databanks, machine translation and AI-systems (cf. Rothwell *et al.* 2024), a machinic ensemble that can only be mastered by the individual's submission to instrumental rationality.

Technological determinism and translation technology

The notion of *technological determinism* refers to the belief that technology functions as a neutral tool for achieving specific aims, rather than as an ideological and political driving force that actively intervenes in cultural values, societal norms, and human behaviour. Responsibility for the consequences of technological creations, for instance, is often shifted away from developers and profiteers, being attributed instead to societal demands, market forces, or user behaviours. Technological determinism considerably intersects with instrumental reason, given its comparable neglect of culture, society, or ethical values. Technological evolution has for centuries been driven by Western positivist epistemologies and their ideologies of progress and perfectibility. Maeve Olohan asserts that a "deterministic conception of technology has clear parallels with the Western tradition of positivist views of science as rational, objective, culturally neutral and value-free" (2017: 266). It is commonplace to argue that science, engineering, and medicine belong to the most highly regarded professional fields but they are advancing without sufficient consideration of specific cultural, social, and individual needs. A culture-sensitive outlook would guide technology developers away from universalist solutions, for instance when designing machine translation corpora for local language markets. In addition, an explicitly ethical outlook would dissuade

developers from designing technologies whose long-term effects cannot be easily foreseen, as in the case of multilingual AI, which currently reinforces linguistic hierarchies and introduces biases that disadvantage speakers of less widely used languages. These two scenarios appear, however, not entirely realistic: while companies producing AI applications are encouraged to establish AI ethics boards (Blackman 2022), we still live in a profit-driven economic paradigm in which major stakeholders, particularly the Silicon Valley oligopolists (Taplin 2017), fear diminishing returns more than regulatory intervention. More to the point, however, we can safely assume that the more money is at stake the more social responsibility falls by the wayside.

Given the role of markets to stimulate consumption and manipulate consumer behaviour, merely analysing the ideological underbelly of digital capitalism tells us less than half of the story. Ideological analysis needs to be accompanied by a quasi-forensic dedication to the people and corporations that profit from any given technology. This, to be sure, is much easier said than done, if we only consider the huge pool of potential profiteers: "[t]he designers, the distributors, those who profit from the technology, the users, or those who allow the artefacts (AI, guns, paper clippers, or whatever you wish to choose) to be available" (Floridi 2023: 59). However, academic research on the relationship between technology and society does not ignore the human component. The sprawling field of Science and Technology Studies (STS) incorporates numerous materialist and constructivist approaches, such as technology assessment (TA), Bruno Latour's actor-network theory (ANT), or Bijker and Pinch's social construction of technology (SCOT) (Felt *et al.* 2017). Some translation scholars are leaning on these methodological frameworks (cf. Olohan 2019 for an overview). But although sociotechnical research deals with a highly ideological subject matter, there is little to no critique of the persistent problem of capital accumulation and the accompanying belief in eternal growth, just as of the spiralling out-of-control problem of technologically-induced climate change. As these two (sub-)conscious modes of thinking – instrumental reason and techno-determinism – demonstrate, ideology cannot be easily equated with deliberate oppression or political control, ideology works within and through the human subject and thus bears real-life consequences.

The commodification of language and translation

Dominant modes of thinking shape the interplay of technology and society. The *commodification* of everyday life is directly linked to the historical evolution and global expansion of capitalism. The ideology of eternal progress, growth, and profit, connected with hardwired ideas about an inalienable right to property, is driving the commodification of our life world into areas undreamed of only a few years ago (Tittenbrun 2017: 140). The commodification of human relationships, animals, resources like water, and so on, deprives the natural world of its unique enigmatic qualities, of its mystical "aura" (Adorno 1997) that differentiates natural objects from market commodities. We know that nature busily strives to craft unique creations – humans, animals, plants, even geological formations – yet capitalist ideologists are busy striving to produce cloned and standardised "hypercommodities", which Jean Baudrillard describes as mass-produced virtual goods and services optimised for profit and characterised by high symbolic value yet negligible practical utility (1994: 75–78). The same goes for communication, languages, and translation, which are gradually deprived of their authenticity and use value during the processes of (digital) market exchange. Leaning on Monica Heller's early work on linguistic commodification, David Block notes:

> [T]he commodification of language means a shift from a valuing of language for its basic communicative function and more emotive associations – national identity, cultural

> identity, the authentic spirit of a people and so on – to valuing it for what it means in the globalized, deregulated, hyper-competitive, post-industrial "new work order" in which we now live. . . . In other words, it means a shift from language as use-value to language as exchange-value.
>
> (2010: 294–295)

Apart from the world's quasi-wholesale commodification, digital capitalism represents the online component of a rhizomatic sequence (Deleuze and Guattari 1982: 3–25) that transforms the communications, languages, and translations of the many into a prized commodity for the few. What does the marketisation of languages mean for transcultural practices? In digital capitalism, the most valued resources traded on deterritorialised online markets are virtual data assets, and they tend to be owned by private commercial enterprises. In the high-tech sphere of (automatised) digital translation services, the currency of exchange is no longer calculated in translated *words*; rather, we speak of the value of translation *data*. Today's "three crown jewels" – data, information, knowledge – are marketed and exchanged on the Internet's interconnected digital superhighways. As it happens with the commodification of language(s) (Heller 2017), the *use value* of translation, the authentic hallmark of a potentially pleasurable activity, has become overridden by translation's transactional *exchange value*.

Capital and technology have colonised almost all spheres of cross-linguistic mediation. In the translation industry, digital colonialism is masked by a phantasmatic imaginary, a blind faith in the dominance, authority, and integrity of science and functional efficiency (i.e., instrumental reason) and into the apparent wonders of automatic machine translation (i.e., techno-determinism). Not only capitalism and its commodities but also dominant modes of thinking may thus be classified as imperial, colonising, and expansionary forces. Moorkens' concept of "algorithmic norms in translation" is emblematic of the current situation (2024: 483–486), when we consider the large distance between the increasing mathematisation of translation processes in the digital economy and the ongoing debate on cultural norms in translation (Chesterman 2016: 49–84). Digital (online) capitalism itself is an ideology and an illusion, the question thus remains if our inclination for profitable exchange will further cement an emerging "one-dimensional society" governed "by the rationality of the given system and . . . its quantitative extension" (Marcuse 1964/2002: 14).

Exploitation in the political economy

Digital capitalism and its ideologies are entangled within a global network of (re)productive relations commonly described as the political economy. As implied by the adjective "political", here we are dealing with commodified *relations* across people, groups, institutions, countries, and cultures in a diverse landscape of markets. The philosophies and dynamicity of markets, too, are having a profound impact on our way of seeing the world. The prevalence of free market capitalism, for instance, incited Aldridge to exclaim that a great deal "of the 'cultural' turn in the social sciences, and postmodernist theorising . . . can be interpreted as a capitulation of critical reasoning in the face of the dominance of the market" (2005: 36). The orthodoxy of the neoliberal market has left deep scars in intellectual life, prioritising market-driven knowledge, eroding critical inquiry, and marginalising alternative paradigms. In the contemporary world, however, politics and the economy are two sides of the same coin. This section engages with the conceptual relation between the *political and digital economy*, with the science-based modes of exploitation known as *Fordism and Taylorism*, and with current practices of *digital translation in the platform economy*.

From the political economy to the digital economy and back

The political economy can be imagined as the interaction of political, economic, and social forces for the benefit of the (re)production, distribution, and consumption of commodities and services. Political economy research examines the relationships across power structures, ideological positions, and social dynamics in order to comprehend the nature of decision-making, resource allocation, and wealth distribution (Betancourt 2015: 12–13). It is imperative to account for the identities, (ideological) affiliations, and locations of decision-makers. A continuing shift, moreover, can be observed from established *analogue* relations of power in the political economy towards an invisibilisation of power in the networked *digital* economy. The political economy itself may thus be seen to encompass all the material *and* immaterial forces and relations of (re)production, distribution, and consumption while the digital economy features new ways of organising and applying largely immaterial resources and services to maintain competitiveness and economic growth (Ibrahim 2021: 7). The digital economy relies heavily on information and communication technologies and it is governed through a complex set of power relations that involve a large variety of digital practices (Øverby and Audestad 2021). Today's largest and most valuable corporations are profiting from the immateriality and delocalised composition of the digital economy. By comparison, the most valuable companies during European industrialisation in the 19th and early 20th centuries largely profited from the materiality of physical commodities such as oil or steel, located in clearly demarcated geographical spaces (Chandler 1977).

The corporate dominance of giant tech companies – for example, Alibaba, Apple, Baidu, Google, Meta, or Microsoft – reflects the monopolisation of knowledge and information through enclosed software ecosystems, algorithmic governance, digital platforms, and data ownership. Tech companies are largely owned by other corporations through shares, allowing them to receive substantial investments and rapidly increase their net value, much like giant snowballs (Bradford 2023: 59). These firms create, curate, and control vast amounts of knowledge, information, and digital know-how, enabling them to influence and manipulate everything from consumer behaviour to political discourse (Zuboff 2018: 268). Their global online availability leaves national legislators in an ethical quandary, allowing digital companies to evade national taxation and ethical standards set by regulatory bodies, such as the Decent Work Agenda of the International Labour Organisation. This, in turn, makes them prone to undermining the rights of the labour workforce (Fırat, Gough, and Moorkens 2024). The primary reason large digital companies evade taxes is their use of global corporate structures, profit-shifting strategies to channel profits into low-tax jurisdictions, and the exploitation of loopholes in national tax laws to minimise their liabilities. After all, they largely offer intangible rather than material goods. Large swathes of the global working class, especially in cheap labour countries, are taking on the least wanted digital jobs, for instance, content moderation for some of the major social media companies in the Philippines (Roberts 2019). Such roles perpetuate global wage disparities and precarious work conditions while raising serious concerns about the psychological toll and lack of regulatory protections for these knowledge workers. Translators and interpreters, as an integral part of the working class, and despite the apparent AI-induced demise of translational professions, will play a significant role in the global political economy for years to come. The reasons for this are, paradoxically, an increase in societal multilingualism paired with a consistently high, even rising demand for translation and interpreting services due to globalisation, digitalisation, migration, and persistent online trade (Nimdzi 2024: 42).

Post-Fordism and neo-Taylorism in the digital economy

In the new digital order of labour and the economy, two interlocked developments deserve special attention. These are the *machinisation* of the forces of (re)production and distribution and the *scientification* of labour relations. The constitution of the political economy in the 21st century, however, reaches far beyond established political and economic power relations. Betancourt, for instance, anticipates "machinic relations within the realm of greater and lesser control produced, maintained, and reified by *how* digital capitalism and the ideology of the digital reinforce each other through technology" (2015: 12–13; emphasis original). Here we are back again at the Archimedean point of ideology, at the point where large-scale sociotechnical shifts are converging with interpersonal relations effective in the political economy. Beneath the ideological smokescreen, however, there remain real relations of oppression and exploitation in the digital economy that need critical analysis. With a focus on human-machine relations, these may be understood as *neo-Taylorist relations of management* and *post-Fordist relations of production* (cf. Amin 1994).

The practice of Taylorism is named after the US engineer Frederick Winslow Taylor, who conceived of a strictly hierarchical and formalised relationship between managers, administrators, and workers. For Taylor, "the gradual substitution of science for rule of thumb throughout the mechanic arts" was the key to enable any worker "to do his work better and quicker than he otherwise could" (1911: 25–26). In effect, however, Taylor's *scientification* of labour relations, as explained by Giordano, mainly succeeded in separating "elements of planning and control from the shopfloor and place them in the hands of scientific experts" (1992: 101). Under capitalist relations of exploitation, a scientific regime of management has thus further disincentivised and deskilled generations of administrators and workers in mass production industries. Classical Taylorism has become accompanied by the notion of neo-Taylorism, in reference to today's digitally interconnected and tech-saturated office workspaces. Neo-Taylorism comes with the decisive "advancement" of enhanced digital monitoring and worker control. Considering the digital economy of industrialised translation workflows, Moorkens asserts that "a good deal of translation work is at the lower end of the market, where automation will be used where possible and cost is a major selling point" (2020: 27).

Named after the US American car entrepreneur Henry Ford, the practice of Fordism entails the science-based arrangement of (mass-)production workflows, as immortalised in car production assembly lines. Fordist management aims to streamline, up-scale, and automate commodity production in a time- and cost-effective manner (Lipietz 1987: 35–36). The digital economy has facilitated a transition towards post-Fordist practices, most evidently in industrial sectors producing immaterial commodities such as knowledge and information. The underlying gradual *machinisation* elicited by post-Fordism is of particular interest because it bears a direct relation to the digital transformation of the language and translation industry. According to Elam, the post-Fordist era embodies "technological transformations and a new 'regime of accumulation' but also institutional transformations and a new 'mode of regulation'" (1994: 44). While this observation underscores the always transitory character of capitalism, it also provides a vivid image of a changing industrial landscape, from a global patchwork of geographically dispersed language service providers towards today's hyperconnected, "machinised" and maximally efficient machine translation workflows (Rothwell *et al.* 2024). The translation industry, positioned at the crossroads of technological efficiency and global communication demands, now operates through quasi-automated production lines that fundamentally redefine perceptions of quality and the socioeconomic value of translation.

Digital translation platforms

Following the 1990s Internet revolution, the world has become truly digitally interconnected. Innumerable digital companies and services have been launched, succeeded, or failed, and in the process created new modes of production and dissemination. The Internet has given rise to a novel consumer culture, where so-called "prosumers" actively produce and consume online content (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010). Language plays a significant role in the global expansion of virtual cyberspace, also propelling translation to the forefront of the language service industry. Translation is not only an integral part of information and communication technologies but also entrenched in software programmes, applications, social media, video games, and all kinds of digital services. Translation and localisation (the cultural adaptation of products to regional expectations) enable digital commodities and services to cross linguistic and cultural barriers and reach consumers worldwide. Today's professional translation workflows range from traditional and hybrid human translation via crowd translation to automatic machine translation (Rothwell *et al.* 2024). In the translation and interpreting labour market, there has been a shift from employment by classical translation agencies towards mass employment by digital translation platforms (Fırat 2024). The so-called "platformisation" of translation and interpreting work has become the subject of critical reflection in translation studies (e.g., Fırat 2021; Fırat, Gough, and Moorkens 2024; Giustini 2024).

Gökhan Fırat invoked the phrase "uberisation of translation work" and argues that "newly emerging digital labour platform companies such as Uber perpetuate the classic capitalist business model while generating greater risks for workers" (2021: 49). In a recent study, Fırat, Gough, and Moorkens (2024) investigated the work conditions of 48 platform translators from Turkey, comparing them with the Decent Work standards set up by the International Labour Organisation. A large number of translators nowadays work as freelancers on digital translation platforms, and the empirical results are sobering, because "a significant portion of translation workers in Turkey might be exposed to working conditions that are exploitative and unsustainable, which infringes upon fundamental human rights" (Fırat, Gough, and Moorkens 2024: 436). These results are further corroborated in Fırat's PhD thesis, which also provides an intriguing comparison to the far more ethically viable model of cooperative translation platforms, understood as "business enterprises that are mostly owned and governed by their members and workers, such as a team of translators, interpreters, proofreaders and post-editors" (2024: 4–5).

Translation work on profit-driven digital platforms significantly contributes to a loss of the value of translating as a service and of translation as a product. Similar challenges extend to interpreting. Deborah Giustini observes the same phenomenon in the interpreting industry, where platforms "operate in line with neoliberal principles of deregulation and a sales-oriented work culture" that "prioritise[s] centralised management control", with the result of "compel[ling] interpreters to align to their ways of operating to maintain business continuity and redress the asymmetry of the work relationship" (2024: 445). In the platformised translation and interpreting industries, capitalist businesses tend to allocate translation and interpreting jobs through automatised digital processes based on performance completion rates, reputation scores, and response times. Translation and interpreting platforms depend on the analytical power of data, which is the raw material and lifeblood of the global digital economy. It is thus unsurprising that the impersonal nature of algorithm-driven metrics in productivity tracking, which pressures translation workers to meet performance standards, further reinforces exploitative behaviour not only by platform owners but also by the clients of translators and interpreters (Giustini 2024: 456).

Translation technology in the multitude

Technology transcends geographical and cultural boundaries, enabling the adoption and spread of new sociocultural norms, linguistic varieties, and behavioural traits. In the current neoliberal climate, digital technologies are developed and programmed mainly to achieve optimal results as quickly and cost-effectively as possible. Developers and benefactors propagate new tech innovations with a quasi-religious fervour in a language of marketing hyperbole, presenting AI technologies as the future saviour of humankind (Baumgarten 2024). Such hubris testifies to a trend in the tech industry that ascribes quasi-messianic powers to AI technologies, thought of as being able to transcend our natural limitations. Given the huge implications of AI, it would be irresponsible to leave the fate of the planet in the hands of a small but enormously wealthy technocratic elite. Translation technologies, like many other technologies, owe their existence to *industrial extractivism,* and they are subject to the expropriation, control, and monetisation of their linguistic assets by the biggest tech players, which has come to be known as *data colonialism* (Couldry and Mejias 2019). The important task, therefore, would be to imagine the place of translation technology in a global *multitude* that remains conscious of its indelible bond with nature and non-human beings.

Against extractivism

The heightened visibility of neural machine translation systems and multilingual AI pushes the underlying relations of power that sustain these technologies even further beyond the surface. As Christian Fuchs rightly argues, "[c]lass relations and relations of dominations [sic] disappear behind the immediacy of things. Capitalist society, exploitation, and domination thereby appear to be normal and natural" (2022: 146). Translation technologies and their accompanying hardware are composed of raw materials extracted from natural resources. Michael Cronin was one of the first to highlight the intimate connection between industrial *extractivism*, translation and its technologies, because "what is concealed from users by the seemingly 'clean' technologies of the virtual society and economy is their deep implication in the logic of extractivism" (2020: 520). What is more, and as outlined in the previous section, the platformisation of immaterial digital labour intensifies the exploitation of translation workers, but it also literally "consumes" them as expendable human resources, since "not only scarce metals and energy but also the human resources of translators . . . become part of that infrastructural unconscious hidden from view by high-tech boosterism" (2020: 523). This time, the Freudian unconscious leads us to the ideological blinders of digital capitalism, "where cash rather than compassion is generally needed to put food on the table" (2020). Industrial extractivism destroys nature's assets and harms our relations with the natural environment. Given this bleak scenario, could a "low-tech approach to translation technology", in the form of "an anti-extractivist commitment to the valuing and appropriate monetization of human resources" (2020: 523) make any meaningful difference?

The elimination of extractivism would necessitate the elimination of the prevailing geopolitical, economic, and industrial framework. Global power politics based on an imperialist mindset, an economic model based on the exploitation of workers, and an industrial mass-production line based on cost-reduction, speed, and efficiency can only contribute to further alienation between humankind and nature. Reasonable change may therefore only be expected from outside the capitalist profit machine, from the marginalised, the stigmatised, and the downtrodden, as famously argued by Herbert Marcuse (1964/2002: 260–261). The worldwide Indigenous struggle for cultural survival, legal justice, and land rights might not be the most obvious candidate for a critical

account of the social and ethical implications of translation technologies. Considered in the context of ecological extractivism, however, Indigenous people are under severe threat from the neoliberal greed for natural resources required for all kinds of high-tech commodities including digital translation tools and systems. Seen in this light, the Indigenous struggle for justice would even serve as a point of departure for international resistance and as an inspiration for alternative models of organising the global political economy (e.g., Kothari *et al.* 2019). After all, Indigenous ways of life tend to be in tune with the natural rhythms of nature, far away from a predatory ideology that regards flora, fauna, and earth's elements as mere pawns to be utilised, manipulated, and monetised for personal gains. Indigenous legal rights are closely connected to language and translation (Korak 2024: 69), and their communality with nature might become an inspiration for an ecologically sustainable use of digital translation technologies.

Overcoming data colonialism

The capitalist transformation of a significant part of the global political economy into a digital network of immaterial commodities, data, and services is indebted to the history of imperialism and colonial rule (Ibrahim 2021: 24). Western colonial conquest and expropriation, as Ibrahim (Ibrahim 2021: ix) argues, "is followed by the domination of data and knowledge which forms the basis of new information empires". Data, information, and knowledge constitute the raw material for digital processing and commerce. They are, furthermore, the enablers of new modes of surveillance and manipulation with an enormous potential for networked digital control mechanisms. The state-led regulation of populations extends its tentacles not only over the social body but also over the human body itself, an evolutionary process epitomised in Foucault's (1978: 142) widely quoted notion of biopower. Almost 50 years after Foucault's coinage, digital capitalism provides empirical confirmation to an emerging biopolitical order based on knowledge, information, and data, where "within the data economy resides a biopower, a reconfiguration of digital technologies as biotechnologies which mediate affectivity and subjectivity of the human" (Ibrahim 2021: 32). How do communication, language, and translation fare in this biotechnological reconfiguration? It is not unreasonable to assume that human communication will become more hybridised and artificial in the wake of proliferated multilingual AI technologies. In a similar vein, the individuality and affectivity of human language will become eroded in the wake of a parallel proliferation of synthetic language data. These likely outcomes of *data colonialism* (Ibrahim 2021: 25) will have a significant impact on the future of translation and its practitioners.

The cultural and linguistic implications of data colonialism have been explored in the context of ideological representations of language (Smith *et al.* 2024). The European standardisation of languages unfolded in the wake of the 15th-century Renaissance and the 19th-century political formation of nation-states (Burke 2004). The standardisation of an originally diverse set of language varieties within a given geographical space rarely occurs entirely without political and ideological will, which is why we can speak of the existence of a "standard language ideology" (Smith *et al.* 2024: 1). A standardised language, like most national languages, is an idealised construct that creates artificial hierarchies. It stands in opposition to apparently lesser non-standard varieties, allowing its speakers access to cultural, social, and economic capital (Bourdieu 1983). This state of affairs leads Smith *et al.* to conclude that "[s]tandard language ideology extends to AI-generated language and technologies, in which hierarchies of language are reinforced" (2024: 2). AI-generated language provides an illusion of friction-free communication within and across natural languages. Within languages, because the illusion makes people forget that human communication is full of paradoxes, ambiguities, and inconsistencies. Across languages, because the

ubiquity of online machine translation leads people to believe that translation merely constitutes a process of mechanical conversion devoid of culture and emotion. Claire Larsonneur, for instance, argues that "the very logic of neural machine translation is to wrestle free from the constraints of natural languages by encoding them into mathematical representations" (2021a: 5). The very logic of data colonialism, in turn, is to denaturalise human communication, language, and translation, which, ultimately, calls for a thorough reconsideration of existing power structures.

Towards a (digital) multitude

The old adage "knowledge is power" has become quasi-synonymous with the digital reality of "data power" (Couldry and Mejias 2019). The production, extraction, and accumulation of data form part of a struggle for dominance over digital resources, as data can be converted into capital. Online platforms, for instance, "operate as multiway data auctions, linking users, data buyers and users, and of course the platform itself" (Couldry and Mejias 2019: 25). In this process, platforms create an entirely novel way of seamlessly assimilating everyday life into virtual cyberspace through "software that enables platforms to produce 'the social' for capital" (Couldry and Mejias 2019: 26). It is, in particular, the "seamlessness" of digital interconnections which feeds into the problematic public perception of language as transparent communication and of translation as a mechanistic transfer. The ideal of friction-free and fluent communication within and across languages has become a normative reality in the digital sphere (Moorkens 2024: 438). The commodification of life and human communication needs to be resisted by a powerful countermovement. Christian Fuchs even urges for a "short-term perspective for digital working class struggles" which should advance "the formation of worker-controlled companies in the digital and cultural industries at all levels of organisation and over the entire globe" (2020: 268). Subsequently, then, "[i]n the medium term the perspective should be to overcome the capitalist organisation of these spheres together with capitalist society" (2020). This surely is a challenge of the highest order. What can be done at this stage is to envisage new structures of power as "the possibility of democracy on a global scale" (Hardt and Negri 2004: xi).

Larsonneur hits the right nerve when arguing that "the social value of translation is so important for our communities that it would make sense to compare it to water, electricity or telecommunications, all utilities that have a claim to be considered as commons" (2021b: 259). The concept of the commons originally refers to people not of noble birth and in academic discourse it has come to be associated with anti-capitalist struggle, democratic decision-making, and a shared collective future. Hardt and Negri prefer the concept of a *multitude*, understood as "an open and expansive network in which all differences can be expressed freely and equally, a network that provides the means of encounter so that we can work and live in common" (2004: xiii–xiv). The multitude reminds us that a democratically governed digital economy can only function within the framework of an equally democratic political economy. Hardt and Negri further stress that "the multitude also and most importantly produces cooperation, communication, forms of life, and social relationships" (2004: 339). As modes of communication, therefore, language and translation have to be regarded as common goods. Larsonneur takes a similar stance, arguing that "[i]f one agrees that language is not a commodity but rather a common good, then it becomes urgent to prevent the increasing invisibility of translation and the [capitalist] appropriation of online discourse" (2021b: 276). A reconfiguration of the digital economy as a global *digital multitude* would thus enhance the recognition of global linguistic diversity and the cultural value of translation. A digital multitude would also support the gradual establishment of a network of digital translation cooperatives which stand for "fairness, collective ownership and democratic governance" (Fırat 2024: 4) and, by extension, for "a return to

nature" (Landauer 1911: 136). This return to nature, however, only makes real sense if we presuppose a fundamental altruistic motive underpinning the human experience.

Conclusion

This brief overview of key concepts and theories about the relationship between translation and digital capitalism can by no means be exhaustive. Translation includes a large range of communicative modalities and an innumerable variety of cultural and linguistic practices. Translation modalities and practices become even further diversified in today's mediatised and digitalised societies (Tieber 2022). It makes sense to discuss translation in connection with digital *capitalist* practices, not least, because cyberspace largely consists of the Internet and its networks and platforms, which "comprises nothing less than the central production and control apparatus of an increasingly supranational market system" (Schiller 1999: xiv). Digital capitalism rests on the for-profit generation and dissemination of knowledge and information, it can be regarded as "a new type of automated, immaterial production", whereby its immaterial consistency hinges on "the larger capitalist superstructure" (Betancourt 2015: 75, 196). As an originally text-based practice, translation has almost entirely become absorbed by the digital realm. Today's professional translation workflows, embedded in the dynamics of capital accumulation, are subject to the exigencies of digital economies of scale, cost reduction, and speedy product delivery (Baumgarten and Bourgadel 2023). While there has been an extraordinary market growth in the language and translation industries since the turn of the century, the number of LSPs continues to shrink to the benefit of ever larger market players (Nimdzi 2024), heralding the gradual emergence of an oligopolic market (Carreira 2023). Professional translation practice is increasingly underpinned by AI-driven and self-learning neural networks. The resulting translation data – to be more precise "Big Translation Data" – are the new gold standard in the industry. These data are largely "syphoned off" by big digital industrial players without consideration for intellectual property rights, for cooperative ethics, or for the environment. I concur with Fuchs who claims that "digital ideology with its fetishistic aura of novelty, speed, and pseudo-radicalness distracts attention from class, exploitation, domination, and other social relations" (2020: 145). Out of this conviction, the preceding argument has been framed within an idealist narrative of relatedness, indeed an almost vanished authentic relatedness with the natural, the spiritual, and the (non)human (Landauer 1911: 136). Considering the cycles of human conflict and war, empire and colonisation, poverty and precarity, as well as climate disaster and its discontents, I would like to conclude with Michael Cronin's sensible assessment of a potential politics of change for the benefit of the (digital) multitude, where

> the emphasis is clearly on extended forms of relatedness and interdependence. The post-Cartesian separation of Nature and Culture is no longer possible. Humans and their environment are mutually inseparable and mutually interdependent. What this means, in effect, is that we must radically rethink the human-centredness of the humanities and the human exceptionalism of cyberutopianism to take account of the necessary humility of our climate predicament.
>
> (2020: 518)

Further reading

Betancourt, M. (2015) *The Critique of Digital Capitalism – An Analysis of the Political Economy of Digital Culture and Technology*. Brooklyn and New York: Punctum Books. (This is a comprehensive ideological

critique of digital capitalism, emphasising its contradictions and ethical challenges, particularly in relation to a pervasive "systemic uncertainty" that defines a hyper-digitalised world.)

Larsonneur, C. (2021b) "Neural machine translation: From commodity to commons?" in Desjardins, R., Larsonneur, C. and Lacour, P. (eds) *When Translation Goes Digital*. Guildford: Palgrave, pp. 257–280. (This chapter discusses language and AI-driven translation in the context of a digital commons, advocating for the recognition of linguistic diversity and the creative aspects of translation as a global common good.)

Moorkens, J. (2020) " 'A tiny cog in a large machine': Digital Taylorism in the translation industry", *Translation Spaces* 9(1), pp. 12–34. (The first article to critically engage with neo-Taylorism in the translation industry. The study explores how task segmentation, worker monitoring, and platform-based workflows impact translator autonomy, urging companies to adopt sustainable work practices.)

Olohan, M. (2017) "Technology, translation, and society", *Target* 29(2), pp. 264–283. (This seminal article is possibly the first to systematically outline the interplay between translation, technology, and power, grounding its analysis in social constructivist epistemology and offering a critical examination of technological determinism.)

Tieber, M. and Baumgarten, S. (2024) "Mean machines? Sociotechnical (R)evolution and human labour in the translation and interpreting industry", *Perspectives: Studies in Translation Theory and Practice* 32(3) (This special issue examines the intersection of digitalisation, automation, and neo-Taylorism in translation and interpreting workflows, focusing on translator autonomy, precarity, and theoretical issues.)

Related topics

- The Value of Translation in Advanced Capitalism
- Artificial Intelligence, Translation, and Cyberfeminism
- The Politics of Translation and Technology: Overcoming Rigid Dichotomies
- Knowledge Commons and Translation Cooperatives
- Power and Technology in Translator Training Institutions

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