

Michael Cronin. (2013) *Translation in the Digital Age*. London: Routledge. ix + 176 pp.

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Michael Cronin's *Translation in the Digital Age* builds on some of the topics explored in *Translation and Globalization*, published ten years earlier. In the new book, Cronin touches upon every imaginable aspect of technologies and social phenomena in our times, such as online machine translation, the semantic web, smartphone applications, social networks, user-based crowdsourced translation, flashmobs, lolcats and Wikileaks. By bringing different areas of thought together, he explores the historical, social and cultural implications of technology for translation while at the same time suggesting how Translation Studies could contribute to our understanding of what is going on in society in the digital age.

The book opens with an introductory chapter that summarises each of the other five chapters. The chapter summaries prove to be useful as one progresses through the book, as more often than not one has trouble understanding the connections between the many concepts presented, especially considering that the titles chosen for the chapters are not particularly informative.

Chapter 1, "The house of translation," analyses the importance of tool use in human evolution, building on archaeologist Timothy Taylor's theory of three systems, which posits that our physical weakness obliged us to develop the use of tools in order to survive. However, human beings have also found it useful to establish mechanisms of social cohesion and in order for the different groups to interact and communicate, they had to resort to translation. Translation is thus presented as the cause and consequence of the need to establish links between different social groups. Throughout history, translation has been made possible by the advances of technology while at the same time making technological advances possible. The author goes on to analyse the ambivalent nature of translation, with the help of examples of cultural encounters between Greeks and Romans, Irish and Venetians. This ambivalence is reflected in oppositions such as "proximity" vs. (physical) "distance" (13), "immediacy" vs. (temporal) "distance" (16), and "universality" vs. "specificity" (16–17). The notion of *entailment* situates the importance of tools within a social and material context, to avoid falling into some sort of technological determinism.

Chapter 2, “Plain speaking,” starts by analysing the role of language in translation, touching upon concepts such as controlled language and global English. New ambivalences faced by translation are presented, such as the conflicting forces that confront a universal *lingua franca* vs. multilingualism cum translation, or service language vs. culture language. These are followed by several other dichotomies: “hybridization” vs. “dehybridization” (39), “spontaneous translation” vs. “internalized translation” (42), “speciation” vs. “specialization” (49), “system” vs. “corpus” (54). The binary distinctions presented in the chapter and throughout the book seem to reflect the constant tension between the opposing forces to which translation is subject.

Cronin challenges the prevailing instrumentalist views of language that lead to “the tyranny of transitivity in understandings of translation” (53). Instead, he proposes translation as an intransitive activity, in the sense that translation does not necessarily have to match a purpose of “pro-ducing” something, but can be a goal in itself. This has consequences for our understandings of translation and of the interaction between translators and technology. For example, it challenges established distinctions such as the one between “culture language” and “service language” (47), and it makes apparent a “dance of agency” (53) between translators and technology. Drawing on Iulia Mihalache, Cronin suggests that the digital age has produced a shift from an “information society” towards an “interaction society” (54). The digital age becomes the interaction age.

A core concept dealt with in the chapter is transparency, revisited and expanded in Chapter 4. Here the author shows how a certain notion of transparency (also understood in terms of accessibility to information), made possible through the combination of technology and translation, promotes language diversity. The chapter also touches upon contemporary trends of business practices made possible with digital technologies, such as the notions of *devolved cost* – “the transfer of the cost from the producer to the consumer” (45) – and *disintermediation*, which have implications for how translation is perceived and operated. The potential relations between transparency and power, and the notion of “split agency” (61) lead to suggestions of how translators could react to some trends that might be detrimental to the profession (61 ff.). In sum, Cronin recommends that translators take action to “protect information as a public good” (61) and to combat the use of free (translation) labour.

In Chapter 3, “Translating limits,” Cronin starts by questioning certain “messianic” (65) conceptualisations that see translation as an enabler of mutual understanding towards a harmonic world. The discussion about limits arises as a natural consequence of the realisation that borders and boundaries exist everywhere, and so do unresolved conflicts. Limits, however, are seen not only negatively – for instance, as something that impedes movement or hinders growth – but also as

a necessary constituent of human existence, as posited by Ludwig Feuerbach. In translation, the necessary limits exist in several guises, be they limits of understanding, time limits, etc.

The use of categorisations and oppositions continues through the use of distinctions such as internal vs. external limits, extensive vs. intensive culture, “technocosm” vs. “ethnocosm” (71), “openness” vs. “closure” (74) and “submissiveness” vs. “imperial hubris” (ibid.). The dazzling profusion of dual distinctions in the author’s reasoning – often borrowed from other authors, one must admit – seems to find support in the statement that “translation is a profoundly ambiguous operation” (ibid.).

One central opposition in the chapter is between identity and variability. Cronin juxtaposes the age of mechanical reproduction, where sameness and identity are the norm, to the age of digital reproduction, characterised by similarity and variability. In this context, the source text is viewed as an *objectile*, a concept developed by Gilles Deleuze and referring to a framework or “parametric function” (88) that guides the generation of multiple *objects*. The multiple (potential) translations of a text are then realisations of the possibilities inherent to the source text, seen as an objectile that “answers to the particular mixture of constraint and liberty that informs the task of the translator” (89). The awareness of what translation entails offers us an instrument for surviving the digital age – that of identifying the new amid the overflow of information, which is made from multiple realisations of the few really relevant objectiles.

In Chapter 4, “Everywhere,” one’s suspicion that Michael Cronin sees translation everywhere is confirmed. The chapter title is borrowed from a term coined by Adam Greenfield and refers to “ubiquitous computing” (98) or pervasive technology. The idea is that computers may be present everywhere, just like “electricity that passes invisibly through the walls of every home, office, and car” (ibid.). Here Cronin expands the notion of translation to encompass the conversion of information (not only natural language) from one medium to another. Based on information theorists such as Claude Shannon, Cronin argues that if communication consists in “reproducing at one point either exactly or approximately a message selected at another point” (102–103, citing Shannon and Weaver [1949, 31]), this is exactly what translation does. Therefore, it makes sense to “[see] our contemporary age as a translation age rather than an information age” (104–105).

One main argument in the chapter deals with how translation is used to “promote and enhance linguistic diversity in the digital age” (92). The translation economy is analysed by examining three factors: volume (“critical mass”), time and cost. Digital technologies have allowed content to be produced in unprecedented high volumes, and globalisation practices have increased the need for this content to be translated into more and more languages. The same two drivers (digital

technologies and globalisation practices), within the context of a 24/7 culture, have also required that translations be produced and delivered in increasingly shorter time frames. If communication technologies such as the internet can “annihilate time as well as space” (104), so can translation, and its effects “could be radical and far-reaching” (ibid.). The threats posed by this acceleration of information delivery lead the author to make another recommendation to translators, namely, “to incorporate and defend chrono-diversity in their working practices in the context of the time–space compression and near-instantaneous communication” (95).

Another main argument in the chapter revolves around the notions of interactivity and collaboration. With examples from wiki-translation and crowdsourcing initiatives, the author points out what implications those features of the digital age can have for the notion of translation and for the translator profession. The argument is developed around the notions of presumption, post-print translation literacy and pluri-subjectivity. In short, when consumers become producers (or at least part of the production chain), and the audience begins to translate, the traditional role of the translator is put into question. When the linear reading of books is supplanted by non-linear reading of hypertexts, translation practices are also required to change. Finally, when translators move from working in isolation (cf. the traditional image of St. Jerome translating the Bible in his study) to working in cooperation, in either multi-translator projects or crowdsourcing initiatives, translation subjectivity (or authorship) is replaced with “a pluri-subjectivity of interaction” (102).

The third argument in the chapter goes back to the concept of transparency, dealt with in Chapter 2. Cronin proposes three types of transparency – ethical, ostensible and penal – each of them responsible for “particular forms of translation practice” (108). The chapter shows how the notion of transparency has become even more relevant in the digital age for how we understand translation, especially due to the “reconfiguration of the notion of privacy” (106) made possible by the new technologies.

In Chapter 5, “Details,” an initial opposition is established between “detailed” and “universal” thinking. The opposition is used to reflect on the different forms that translation can assume and it operates at several levels. One example is the distinction between “indicative” (118) (gist) translation provided by online machine translation systems, where the “overall effect” (119) (universal) is what matters and the details are unimportant, on the one hand, and high-quality translation, where great effort is invested in dealing with the details, as illustrated in various examples of literary translation, on the other. Cronin mentions the detrimental role that indicative (machine) translation and translation technologies could have for language itself, in part for not capturing the *details* that constitute language.

A subdivision of the universal is taken from Jean-Claude Milner between the “easy universal” (119) and the “difficult universal” (121), both of which partake in the tensions faced by translators. A renewed concern with detail that leads to a (necessarily) difficult universalism is responsible for new approaches of quality in the digital age.

In a second subdivision, translation is seen again subject to “the tension between forms of *extensive universality* that drive the translation industry worldwide and the claims of *intensive universality* which underline the maximally difficult and maximally complex nature of words and their use” (129, my emphasis).

Another operative distinction is the one between “autonomous” vs. “heteronomous” (135). By looking into the role of autonomy in the context of translation automation, Cronin brings in the concept of conviviality, especially in the context of the interaction between humans and their tools (here understood in a much broader sense than in Chapter 1). In this context, Cronin suggests that tools should have an emancipatory role; that is, they are supposed to serve humans rather than enslave them, and translators should learn how to engage with technology amidst a large spectrum of automatic and semi-automatic processes.

The digital age also brings up other issues to the status of the profession, such as those posed by demonetisation (and consequently, de-professionalisation) and the “universalization of ignorance” (136), where the expert’s opinion is seen as being as valid as anyone else’s.

By touching upon the notion of consensualism and the distinction between universal, uniform and common, Cronin compares translation to a search of the common, as translation “attempt[s] to construct a kind of commonality between different languages and cultures through a process of endless negotiation of meaning” (138). Translation can thus be inserted into a type of humanism that liberates it from the notion of derivative or secondary task. By looking into the different types of humanism proposed by Claude Lévi-Strauss (aristocratic, bourgeois and democratic) and Milad Doueihi (digital humanism), Cronin shows how translation has always been at the core of all the definitions of humanism.

The electronic duality of the digital in technical terms is reflected in Cronin’s analyses of translation. The frenetic subdivisions of concepts into (usually binary) categories throughout the book seem to reflect the way everything works in the digital age and evoke the image of digital processors producing anything imaginable from a dizzying flow of 0’s and 1’s. This is probably the effect of an epistemological phenomenon mentioned by Cronin himself (46), citing McGilchrist (2009, 98): “To a man with a hammer everything begins to look like a nail.”

In sum, the book proposes new conceptual tools to recontextualise traditional notions around translation and shows the impact not only of digital technologies on translation, but also of translation for understanding the digital age. In a sense,

it could also have been entitled “the digital in the translation age.” Although the introduction suggests that the book might be suitable for “students, scholars, and, indeed, anyone interested in the future of human cultures and languages” (2), one should not expect to find here any kind of “prophecy” or easy solution, but rather a journey in search of a “difficult universalism” that might help to explain what characterises the current age and what is in it for translation and translators.

References

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