



PANEL ABSTRACT  
“TRANSHUMAN OR POSTHUMAN TRANSLATION? DIGITAL  
TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETING IN MIGRATORY SETTINGS”

The digital transformation of modern societies bears significant ethical and social challenges for transcultural communication. Particularly in the context of global migration processes and refugee movements, the interconnection between humans and information technologies deeply changes communication practices. These transformations are linked to epistemological and ethical ambivalences which this panel aims to analyse from different viewpoints and perspectives.

Whilst, for instance, machine translation technologies such as Google Translate or multilingual cartographic apps such as Arriving in Berlin. A map made by refugees maintain racial and ethnic demarcations on the grounds of linguistic competence, the digitization of everyday migratory realities paradoxically harbours the potential to subvert entrenched discriminatory structures and practices.

Moreover, language and national policies in many parts of the world tend to sideline human experts as facilitators of communication across languages, as evidenced by the persistent lack of professional interpreters in community settings. In multilingual migration settings, this lack of human expertise is often compensated for by technological replacements in the form of translation machines and networking technologies which, paradoxically, challenge existing hegemonies and linguistic ideologies (O'Thomas 2017, 292). Thus, the increasing 'machinization' of transcultural communication may also bring about a positive 'humanizing effect'.

The contributions in this panel reflect various translation-related phenomena in the context of migration against the backdrop of a 'posthuman' critical theory (cf. Braidotti 2013) that is set to critique the illusory 'transhuman' techno-fantasy in search of a 'perfect translation'. They analyse how digital translational practices are employed as an instrument of power – whereby power is to be understood not only as a restrictive force, but also, in the Foucauldian sense, as an affirmative practice.

The contributions examine from the perspective of translation studies – and in the sense of a 'longue durée' penetration of technology and organic life – "embodied and embedded representations of multi-layered and complex power relations that constitute the structure of 'the human' and thus also undergird our 'becoming posthuman'" (Braidotti 2018, 158).

In this context, the ethical consequences of the digitization of migrant multilingual communication also need to be scrutinised. On the one hand, translation is becoming increasingly invisible and automated. On the other hand, however, translation now also increasingly generates an ethics of resistance in the face of Eurocentric domination and may thus lead to a politics of empowerment, especially in relation to the subaltern.

'Posthuman translation' ultimately leads to an 'irritation' of the social moment, propelling the question of what 'human communication' actually means into the foreground, especially in the face of ever expanding language and information technologies. The question of how translation technologies in migration settings contribute to a continuous renegotiation of the idea of what it actually means to be human therefore constitutes the starting point for the contributions gathered in this panel.

We will take, first, a critical look at the ideological 'transhuman' motivation to abolish language barriers through technology as a long-term idealistic goal. Secondly, we will discuss how the application of translation technologies in migration settings not only partially improves communication across languages but simultaneously illuminates 'blind spots' in diverse institutional, legal and also interpersonal contexts.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

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**"ONLINE INTERPRETING FOR MIGRANTS, WITH MIGRANTS AND ON  
MIGRATION: THREE CASES TO REFLECT ON THE POWER OF THE  
HUMAN-TECHNOLOGICAL NEXUS"**

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This presentation explores the digital transformation of interpreting, a practice which before the Covid-19 pandemic was largely advocated and performed as a face-to-face, on-site modality of communication. In an attempt to address the ethical, epistemological and political questions raised by the increased technologization of human interpreting, it analyses three cases of online interpreting in three different contexts linked to migration and forced displacement: remote interpreting in asylum hearings in the French overseas territories, (online) interpreting in the language justice movement in the USA, and radical alternatives to farmers migrations in the transnational movement for food sovereignty. While taking place in completely different ecologies of communication, each case will provide a vantage point from which to explore the transformation of communication practices and the increased hybridization of the human and the technological.

In the case of the French National Court of Asylum Right, hearings appellants take place across a videolink to bridge the physical distance between the judiciary (located in mainland France) and asylum appellants as well as the interpreter (located in the French overseas territories). These video- and interpreter-mediated asylum hearings constitute a compelling case to explore the constraints and levers (human as well as technological) of interpreting ethics and justice towards advancing greater respect of refugees' communication rights in national asylum adjudication systems.

The second case explores the role of interpreting within the language justice movement in the USA as a capacity- and leadership-building approach striving for social justice and resting on migrants' right to communicate, be heard and included. Rooted in several decades of 'language' resistance, I will explore the ethics of language justice interpreting which straddles over public services and grassroots capacity building, over state institutions and social movements, before and after Covid-19, to highlight the continuities and discontinuities between on-site and online interpreting, and to account for the technological materiality of language justice.

Finally, in the case of the transnational social movement for food sovereignty I explore the epistemological and political alternatives to forced displacements of farmers. I focus on the (online) interpreter-mediated meetings of the International Planning Committee for food sovereignty (IPC) that, while not qualifying as a migration setting per se, incubate a radical epistemological and political alternative to forced displacements of farmers in the wake of climate change, human rights violations, and armed conflict.



**"POSTHUMAN TRANSLATION IN A GERMAN RECEPTION CENTRE FOR  
REFUGEES: TOWARDS OVERCOMING ANTHROPOCENTRISM IN  
TRANSLATION STUDIES"**

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While carrying out field research at a German reception centre for refugees I noted several occasions in which machine translation technologies such as Google Translate were used in encounters between asylum seekers and state authorities. One such occasion was particularly striking: As a social worker working at the reception centre told me, asylum seekers sometimes prefer to be translated by a translation machine instead of a human being. The reason given for this at first glance odd preference was that certain topics like one's own sexual orientation can be of such sensitive nature, that a human translator appears not as an aid, but rather as a threat: By translating an asylum seeker's talk about his or her homosexuality, the translator becomes someone who knows about it and might spread this knowledge among other people who are not supposed to know. Google Translate is preferred in this case because, in the asylum seeker's perspective, it has no (potentially dangerous) agency of its own. The choice of a machine thus becomes part of his or her identity management.

This example of machine translation use in a migratory setting not only demonstrates that translation machines are also (increasingly) used in such contexts. Moreover, it questions the very way we commonly think about and distinguish between human and machine translation. In this presentation, I will argue that this distinction cannot be treated as a given. Rather, it should be investigated as an open and empirical question: Who draws this distinction? Why? How? When and where? As I will outline, differentiating between translating humans and machines is a meaningful act which depends on a variety of social conditions and may cause a multitude of social effects. Anthropocentric and -normative presuppositions resulting in a priori claims of the human translator's superiority are a bias to be overcome in translation studies if the digital transformation of its object area is to be adequately understood.



**"CHAOS AND CONTROL: VAMPIRES, ZOMBIES AND CENSORSHIP IN  
THE POSTHUMAN, POST-TRANSLATION WORLD"**

**MARK O'THOMAS**  
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We live in a time of apparent chaos. A war in Europe. A global pandemic. The relentless, exponential growth of technology amid the relentless, unassailable rise of the planet's temperature. We also live in a time of control. Freedom of speech on the one hand is championed as a counter to a so-called cancel culture on the other where governments seek to legislate and circumscribe the parameters of what freedom means in ways that seem to run counter to (older, 20th-century) notions of liberalism. In our species-centric preoccupations, and blinded by the rudimentary limits of our own humanity, humans have deployed technological solutions to linguistic difference for the 'it just works' end-user for whom personal freedom remains a prized commodity of self-service or the service of the self. Here perceptions around borders, languages and cultures have been shifted, occluded, and sterilised. In this world of on-demand machine translation, can the figure of the vampire and the posthuman zombie serve as useful metaphors for understanding the biological integrity of a kind of linguistic singularity that sits against, and in radical opposition to, centralised, homogenous, digital control stored in servers of an altogether different singularity?

**"THE TASK OF THE CYBORG TRANSLATOR: POSTHUMAN POSTEDITING  
AND TRANSHUMAN TRANSLATION"****SPENCER HAWKINS****(JOHANNES GUTENBERG-UNIVERSITÄT MAINZ)**

Posthumanist and transhumanist thinkers could not stand for more different principles even though they both celebrate the expansion of the notion of human experience beyond the strictures of liberal humanism. The former is an academic school of thought dedicated to the emancipatory politics of feminist, anti-racist, and decolonial critiques of the concept of the human; they see the human as having always already been embedded in a network of wider animate and inanimate entities. Posthumanist philosopher Cary Wolf calls transhumanism, by contrast, “an intensification of humanism” (2010) since its glorification of “enhancement” technologies tends to entrench the priority of mind over body, human over animal, and positional goods over the public good. However, they both accept that the human-machine interface is here to stay, and both discern desirable implications in these new modes of human life. The paper will thus include reflections on the enhanced experience of human life for translators’ work (especially the thought-like speed of internet-based research), and it will reflect on both the posthumanist and transhumanist evaluations of this recent form of translator experience.

Since James Holmes’ manifesto of 1972 outlining the areas within the emergent field of Translation Studies, the human-machine interface has been understood as a proper object of study within Translation Studies. In the intervening fifty years, the discourses on writing and translating beyond the old constraints on the human mind have evolved alongside digital technology’s transformation of society. This talk will discuss the uses and limitations of machine translation, especially for the translation of philosophical texts, in order to show that our new posthuman tools reveal something that has always been the case about philosophy translation: the flexible approach to terminology that has always been necessary to effectively translate (and even just understand) philosophical concepts.

Philosophy falls somewhere between literature and other non-fiction genres in terms of how important the non-systematicity in its use of language is to the effectiveness of the work itself. While even strong advocates of machine translation argue that it is not yet useful for literary translation, Mark O’Thomas makes the case that an author or translator’s voice could be “learned” by a machine translation tool and applied even after their death (2017). The idea of immortalizing a great translator of philosophy through his computer sounds almost as desirable as preserving the wisdom of an experienced philosopher. The use of a philosophy translator’s translation memory files would have a value to other philosophy translators on par with the value that a great personal library would have to another philosopher.

Yet the difficulty of automating the translation of philosophy goes beyond matters of style. As Ludwig Landgrebe writes in his posthumous (2010), unsubmitted Habilitationsschrift, written for Edmund Husserl, philosophical language draws on (but transforms) everyday language, and—while one of its principle tasks is to distinguish specialized uses from everyday ones—philosophical writing never fully leaves the everyday resonances of its vocabulary behind. When Barbara Cassin et al. collated a compendium of “untranslatable” philosophical terms, (2004) the source of difficulty around translating philosophical terms often derives from the terms’ polysemy. It is precisely this polysemy that poses an ongoing challenge to machine translation since it requires deep engagement with the history of philosophy to fully appreciate the refractions in a word’s meanings from one sentence to the next. We cyborg translators are learning with ever greater precision not only what our tools can do for us, but which tasks to continue delegating to the brain’s wetware.

**"FEAR AND LOATHING IN BABYLON: MIGRATION, DIGITAL  
TRANSLATION, AND UTOPIA"****STEFAN BAUMGARTEN**

(UNIVERSITÄT GRAZ)

This paper literally almost starts from Adam and Eve, taking the Biblical myth of the Tower of Babel – the enforced scattering of tongues by divine will – as a starting point for an alternative epistemological viewpoint. I aim to envisage a politico-evolutionary trajectory that leads from the iconic Biblical image of human hubris to modern histories of migration and translation, and eventually to the nexus of translation technology, capitalism and new forms of 21st century totalitarianism. It is fair to say that paradigm shifts in translation studies are dialectically related to changing political realities. Since the beginning of the new millennium, research has increasingly focused on the role of translation in the globalizing world and more recently on climate change and questions of ecology. Most of these studies have been focusing on the negative effects of technology and globalization caused by increasing societal and economic inequalities, e.g. on the rise of global violence, on the politics of fear in relation to (state) terror, and especially on the suffering of immigrants. There is also a growing body of research on the ways in which translation can be harnessed to resist authoritarian control, to safeguard minority languages, and there are critical accounts of translation and its complicity with technology-driven biopolitics. These strands of research are important and socially relevant in their own right and, in one way or the other, they are all driven by legitimate concerns that our current global predicament will give rise to new and ever more sophisticated forms of domination and political rule. In this paper, I will argue that whilst a recurrent focus on the negative sides of technology and globalization is absolutely essential for the social relevance of our interdiscipline, it will be equally important to channel our fears into a positive, perhaps even utopian, imagination that keeps searching for alternative horizons of enquiry. I will therefore provide a brief sketch to what extent key concepts from post-Marxist critical theory, from post-Anarchism, and from the burgeoning posthumanist paradigm can be streamlined for achieving a positive and thus socially progressive role for translation in continually dangerous times of state terror and advanced techno-capitalism.