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Chapter 3

"Join Our Community of Translators": Language Ideologies and/in Facebook

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In this chapter, I am concerned with the language ideologies present in — and expressed through — the metalinguistic discourse of Facebook's "translations" application and the metalinguistic commentary of the Facebook "translators" as a community of what can be termed "language mavens" (Cameron, 1996), "language brokers" (Blommaert, 1999), or just "language workers" (Thurlow, 2007). Metalanguage is often understood simply as language about language, but, as Jaworski et al. (2004, p. 4) suggest, this is too literal a characterization for what they prefer to describe more broadly as any "language in the context of linguistic representations and evaluations." Certainly, the individual "translators" of Facebook are engaged in policing language in the sense that Blommaert et al. (2009, p. 203) talk about the "production of 'order' — normatively organised and policed conduct." Metalanguage thus inevitably works at an ideological level, influencing people's actions and priorities in a number of often quite concrete ways. The case study I am presenting here offers an insight into the ways language ideologies are uniquely produced by the "community of translators" who are themselves also facilitated (and encouraged) by Facebook Inc.

Theoretical Background

Headquartered in California, USA, Facebook was first launched in 2004 and was initially only available to American university students and faculty. Today, however, Facebook Inc. estimates that approximately 70% of its users are from outside the USA (Facebook, 2010, Press room statistics). Until 2008, Facebook was also only available in English, at which time the "internationalization" of the site into other languages began. Facebook Inc. has not employed translators on its staff, however; instead, developers created a "translations" application that enables users to translate the site themselves — into certain languages as decided by Facebook Inc. At first, a Spanish-language version was launched, followed quickly by French and German and eventually a further 21 languages. As of May 2010, there are 108 languages fully available or in translation. This list includes European regional or minority languages (e.g., Irish and Catalan), other "national" varieties (e.g., Français Canada and Français France), as well as a host of other "ways of speaking" such as Esperanto, Klingon (from Star Trek), and Pirate English. Like many others, Paffey (2007, p. 322, on Spanish) notes that "it seems most people — expert or lay — have an opinion (often quite strong) on language matters" (see also Cameron, 1997; Thurlow, 2011). This is very much the case in Facebook's community-driven translation effort where language ideologies are expressed implicitly and explicitly on many issues.

In this regard, I rely on Woolard's (1998, p. 3) definition of language ideologies as "representations ... that construe the intersection of language and human beings in a

social world.” As Woolard notes, language ideologies are seldom just about the language alone. (This is apparent when discussion occurs over whether a Facebook translator’s name appears in Irish or English.) In her definition of language ideology, Meylaerts (2007, p. 298) specifically includes translation: “a constellation of beliefs, assumptions and expectations, held by groups of people in a certain geo-political and institutional context, about language use, language values, language users, but also about language contacts and translation.” Translation, as Bassnett (2007, pp. 5–6) writes, is “not just the transfer of texts from one language into another, it is now seen as a process of negotiation between texts and between cultures, a process during which all kinds of transactions take place mediated by the figure of the translator.” And the context(s) of translation are rarely neutral; translation is always conducted within the context of existing language regimes and hierarchies with their inherently unequal power relations (Cronin, 1996). Cronin also remarks that the translation of minority languages is oftentimes polemical due to the unequal relationship(s) between majority and minority languages. In the case of Facebook, this is a two-fold struggle between the translators and their context: first, through the confines of the actual translations application designed by Facebook Inc. and, second, between the community of translators.

Furthermore, it is important also to acknowledge the language ideological implications of the medium itself. As Johnson and Ensslin (2007, p. 4) write, media policy and practice in relation to language are “central to the very construction of what we all (experts or otherwise) think language is, could, or ought to be like.” However, new media are not as top-down in their influence as more traditional media with their explicit language policies and style guides. Facebook is not a medium of communication in which knowledge is simply presented or mis-presented; like many new media, it allows knowledge to be presented from many sources, and then ignored and/or negotiated. New media are also spaces where multiple language ideologies—as well as individual and commercial interests—meet and influence language practices. Ultimately, what occurs is the construction not only of an Irish language translation of Facebook but also of the Irish language itself in the new media domain (see Johnson & Ensslin, 2007, p. 8).

In what follows, I will start by giving a brief overview of the status of the Irish language and its relationship with the new media. The Facebook translations application will be introduced as well as the motivations of both Facebook Inc. in translating the website and those of the community translators themselves. Along the way, I will briefly explain my research design and data collection. I will then consider in more detail the range of language ideologies that shape the discourse of Facebook Inc. itself and the metalinguistic commentary of the translators.

Gaeltacht 2.0: The Irish Language and New Media

The Irish language is the first official language of the Republic of Ireland as declared in Article 8 of Bunreacht na hÉireann, the Irish constitution. The English language is designated as the second official language. Since 2007, Irish has also been an official language of the European Union (EU), although not on a par with other EU official languages (European Union, 2005). While 1.66 million of the 4.2 million resident Republic of Ireland population claim to be able to speak Irish, just over a million of these report either that they never speak the language or that they speak it less than weekly (Central Statistics Office, 2007). The Irish language can thus be seen as a

“privileged minoritised language” (Kelly-Holmes, 2006) but one that is also classified as “definitely endangered” on the UNESCO (2009) vitality scale. Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla 2003 (Official Languages Act 2003) promotes the use of Irish for official purposes in the state and provides for the availability of public services in the Irish language. Under the act public bodies must agree to a language scheme for that organization with the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. Needless to say, the act does not make provisions in relation to websites of public bodies. However, a public body can include the provision of website services in Irish in its language scheme, which, if not provided according to the language scheme, can be investigated by An Coimisinéir Teanga (the Language Commissioner).

The Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs is the Irish government department with responsibility for the promotion and maintenance of the Irish language. In 2009, it published Straitéis 20 Bliain don Ghaeilge 2010–2030 (Dréacht) (20 Year Strategy for the Irish Language [Draft]). Significantly, one of the nine areas for action it sets out is media and technology. The report notes the “new directions” in which the Irish language is going and that developments in communications and media technologies have “immense potential” and “open up new channels for individuals and communities to increase their knowledge and regular use of Irish” (Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, 2009, p. 84). Possible initiatives discussed include encouragement of writing in Irish by young people in a range of media formats, including blogging and also youth-focused internet radio broadcasting (Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, 2009, pp. 85–86).

The Irish language does have a presence online in what has been colloquially described as Gaeltacht 2.0. (Gaeltacht refers to Irish-speaking areas designated by the Irish government.) In terms of language policy, however, there really are no legislative provisions for the Irish language in the new media, although there are moves like those just mentioned toward developing such a strategy. Foras na Gaeilge, the statutory body responsible for the promotion of Irish, published its own report in 2009, Straitéis Idirlín don Óige (Dréacht) (Internet Strategy for Young People [Draft]) The organization had carried out field research to ascertain what Irish language services online young people wanted, what services were already online in Irish, and the gaps between these needs and services. In relation to Facebook, the report simply noted that it has been “localised” (Foras na Gaeilge, 2009, p. 3). In fact, the Irish language has been available for translation on Facebook via the translations application since July 2008.

The Facebook Translations Application

The translations application is a Facebook application users can add to their personal profile (akin to a personal homepage). Once a Facebook user adds the translations application to their profile, they automatically become a de facto translator and join the community of translators for the language they have chosen. Individual translators submit translations via the application, which the rest of the community must approve via a voting system. In piloting the application, Facebook was translated into Spanish in less than a month by 1,500 translators (Facebook, 2008, February 7). At the time of writing, Facebook Inc.’s own statistics show that 300,000 users have been involved in translating Facebook. This is a small percentage of the overall Facebook population, but it is a prolific community of informal and formal language workers nonetheless.

Facebook Inc. describes the translations application as an innovative approach combining “the passion of Facebook users with technologies that are systematic and manageable” (Facebook, 2008, July 23). Facebook Inc. has applied for a patent to the US Patent and Trademark Office for the translations application and its method of generating translations (cf. Facebook, 2009, August 6). The translations application works via three steps; Step 1 is “translate the glossary,” which is the translation of a glossary of core Facebook terminology. Step 2 is “translate Facebook”: this is the translation of all the language strings of the site. Finally, Step 3 is “voting and verification,” which entails further translation, along with reviewing and further voting of the translations submitted in Steps 1 and 2. As of May 2010, the Irish language translations application was at Stage 3 and was 98% completed. Once everything has been finished, a language is officially “launched” and made available for use by any Facebook user.

The translations application can be seen to be based on a type of gift economy, where philanthropy is apparently the main motivation for contributing knowledge as opposed to monetary gain (Gentle, 2009, p. 101), as in the case of collaborative communities involved in wikis like Wikipedia. However, from my close observations, it seems that there is more than simply philanthropy at work on Facebook. In this case, the translators as language brokers stand to gain a significant amount of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1994) by submitting their translations and through their involvement in discussions. They are presenting their linguistic expertise and fluency for the rest of the community to see. In their design of the translation application, Facebook Inc. also fosters the creation of a community of senior translators (I return to this point in a moment). Ultimately, therefore, Facebook Inc. draws on the gift economy to create a “community” of good/political will and social prestige in order to benefit commercially. This is a clear reminder that Facebook the social networking site is also Facebook Inc. the corporation.

The web 2.0 business literature discusses what is called the “community model” whereby social networking sites—not to mention the internet as a whole—are seen as primarily economically driven businesses (see Vossen and Hagermann, 2007). With this in mind, we can see how language/s is/ are used in/by Facebook for all sorts of strategic ends. To start, they are used to classify or categorize users into speech communities according to the language they are translating. Facebook Inc. likewise involves individual translators in this “game of categorization” (Heller, 2007, p. 14)—in this case, the construction of an Irish identity around the translation of Irish. Facebook Inc. therefore uses language/s as a metadiscursive resource for building a community, which in turn helps them to extend its corporate reach and to brand itself international/multilingual. Language is always a major identity resource (Heller, 2003), and, as Anderson (1993) writes, the spread of a standard language via the media is crucial to the imagining of the nation-state. By standardizing language practices and norms in Facebook, users are creating an “imagined community” themselves, both an online community and a national community.

The translators of the Facebook translations application constitute a formal and informal mixture of what Thurlow (2007) calls “language workers”; they are “ordinary” users of many ages and backgrounds who contribute for the common goal of having an Irish language version of Facebook, although as highlighted above, their

reasons for doing so may be complex. They are self-appointed in their role as translator; as I mentioned above, anyone adding the application to their profile becomes a translator. No experience or qualifications are required and no one is vetted based on any grounds; linguistic competence in the language is not tested or queried. Only in the debates of the discussion board are their translations and their individual votes questioned, and this is done by other self-appointed translators. Translators are quite passionate about the Irish language and committed to realizing the translation. Having Facebook in your preferred language is of particular importance to minority and minoritized languages such as Irish and Welsh. I noticed one Welsh translator posting words of encouragement on the Irish language translations discussion board in the early days of the application.

While the translations application works through this community of translators, it must be acknowledged that the technical (or mechanical) design of the application certainly influences how translators use the application and how they are obliged to progress through the translation steps. For example, in creating a community of senior translators Facebook Inc. inevitably fosters a hierarchy of expertise (see Newon in Chapter 7 of this volume) and of dominant language ideologies. The leaderboard section of the application shows translators who have translated and voted the most in three leaderboards: “weekly,” “monthly,” and “all time”; this adds to the motivation to translate and makes “senior translators” visible to the entire community. Beyond this — and in more functional terms — an official “style guide wiki” displays advice on translating and is also editable only by the top 20 “all-time” translators of the language. Facebook Inc. has also implemented translator awards in three categories: voting participation, words published, and translations published. The three levels of awards vary based on the frequency and accuracy of translators’ contributions in translation activities such as translating words and voting on the “best” translations — as determined by Facebook Inc., which notes: “These new awards complement the leaderboard previously in place in the application to publicly spotlight top translators” (Kwan, 2009).

Undoubtedly, there is interplay between user’s intention(s) and the technological affordances of the Facebook applications; translators carry out their work within the definite confines of Facebook Inc.’s mechanical designs and institutional regulations. Difficulties or grievances in relation to the translation process and the constraints and rules of the translations application on a practical level are discussed by the translators, but this contribution is primarily concerned with the influence of the language ideologies of Facebook Inc. on the “language community,” the speakers and users of that language.

Research Design and Data

The data for my chapter were generated using virtual ethnographic methods, also known as internet or “guerrilla” ethnography (Androutsopoulos, 2006; McCreery, 2000), first developed by Hine (2000). Virtual ethnography involves “deep looking” in online environments, in my case paying careful attention to language content and interactions between users. Like Hine, I am ultimately interested in knowing what the internet has come to mean as both a cultural space and as a cultural artifact. To this end, since January 2009 I have been collecting material from Facebook and, specifically, the translations application with a particular focus on the Irish language translations application. During this time, I assumed the role of a “lurker,” who, as

Hine explains, is “someone who reads messages posed to a public forum such as a newsgroup but does not respond to the group” (Hine, 2000, p. 106). In other words, I have been observing the development of the Facebook translations application and the Irish translations community in a nonparticipatory manner. I am an invisible onlooker to the changes in the application and the discussions of the community of translators.

The textual data I have been collecting are necessarily multimodal and have been gathered from the many layers and features of the overall Facebook site and from the Irish language translations application in particular. I have also been collecting official Facebook, Inc. publications, such as those discussing the translations application, press releases, career publications, the Facebook Blog, and the Facebook translations application’s main profile page. The patent application by Facebook, Inc. for the translations application on the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office website was also examined.

Any translator can start a “topic” (or thread) in the discussion board on any subject or post a reply to any existing topic. Each of the 96 topics I looked at on the Irish translations application discussion board at the time of the study were examined for evidence of language ideological themes. These were written in Irish and English or a mix of both. The topics analyzed ranged from those posted in July 2008, when the translations application was first released to Irish, to May 2010. The large number of topics gives the impression that the community of translators as an entity regards itself as knowledgeable about the language and its translation, with repeat contributors possibly seeing themselves as more senior translators and/or serving as gatekeepers in the translation process.

“Facebook Available to Everyone, Everywhere, in All Languages”

In the 2008 press release first announcing the translations application, Facebook, Inc. founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg stated that the aim of the application was to facilitate users’ access to Facebook in their “native language(s)” (Facebook, 2008, February 7). When discussing the translations application, Facebook, Inc. describe the languages in translation as their user’s “native” languages, and native language speakers as translators are placed at the heart of the translations application. The Facebook Blog meanwhile views translations by native speakers as the ultimate goal of translation: “Quality is very high - as though the site had been written natively in Spanish” (Wong, 2008). This ideology of the native speaker reveals how Facebook, Inc. views users as speaking a language or variety corresponding to the country they live in; it is an ideology that echoes the territoriality principle in language planning by which “one language is the official language of a specific territory” (Beheygt, 1995, p. 48). Facebook, Inc. brought this notion of territoriality online as a means of promoting membership of the communities created by the translations application. Needless to say, it also serves their corporate agenda of multinational branding (cf. Heller, 2003; Kelly-Holmes, 2005; Thurlow & Jaworski, 2003). To follow Thurlow and Aiello’s (2007) critique, what looks like the servicing of national pride is often really about the shoring up of global capital.

The overall goal of the application, Facebook, Inc. states, is to “make Facebook available to everyone, everywhere, in all languages” (Vera, 2009). This is a comprehensive statement, implying that Facebook is all inclusive, a space for all peoples and all languages. Every language, we must remember, is ultimately another

market with consumers and monetary gain for Facebook, Inc. Minoritized languages (Little, 2008), language dialects, regional varieties (Linder, 2009), and right-to-left languages (Haddad, 2009) are all included in the application. The ultimate goal of the translations application according to Facebook, Inc. is: “to eventually translate Facebook into every language in the world” (Facebook Site Governance, 2009). Facebook, Inc. thus also employs an ideology of parallel monolingualism (Heller, 1999) whereby multilingualism is viewed as multiple, coexisting, but bounded languages. The language varieties of the translations application are separated from each other, and each language has its own translations application where translations and discussions remain distinct from other languages. The users of Facebook may well be bi-, multi- and plurilingual, but Facebook, Inc. structures and promotes each language as a separate entity and categorizes users accordingly.

In their work on “discourses of endangerment,” Duchêne & Heller (2007) are concerned about the disappearance of languages, typically “small” languages, in the near future. Facebook, Inc. certainly appears to take up this discourse, too; through their translations application, they are “saving” language(s) from extinction or, in the case of Latin, bringing it back from the dead. A Facebook Blog post, “Latin Becomes a Living Language on Facebook,” goes on to say that “beginning today, Latin – the staid and reliable language – springs to life on Facebook.” (Linder, 2009). The same post also refers to Latin as a “venerable language” and talks about students of “living languages.” The Latin translators have, we are told, “meticulously translated the site into a ‘dead’ language. Cobwebs may accumulate on the stones that bear Latin phrases, but they will never conceal its distinguished past, nor stand in the way of people’s desire to keep the language alive - even on the web” (ibid). They are very much the same discourses of endangerment that Facebook, Inc. applies elsewhere, subscribing to a kind of linguistic diversity that aligns with biodiversity, whereby the preservation of languages is seen as good for the global cultural environment — and, of course, the gateway to new markets for Facebook, Inc.

As I’ve explained already, the translations application is automatically open to all users who added it to their personal Facebook profile, which does potentially make the site and, consequently, the web more multilingual (cf. Danet and Herring, 2007). However, the default language of the translations application is always English; translations must be submitted from the original U.S. English, and the application interface is, at least initially, only available in English. Although unlikely to be a problem for most Irish speakers, this has the effect of excluding any non-English-speaker from the translation effort. Also, when corresponding with Facebook, Inc., even in relation to issues of translation, Facebook, Inc. demands English only. It is for this reason, that Facebook, Inc.’s translation mission reveals itself as another example of what Kelly-Holmes (2005) calls “fake multilingualism”. Sure, Facebook and Facebook, Inc. are multilingual in 108 languages, but only on the face of it — or, in the case of new media, on the interface of it. It is hard not to conclude that multilingualism is something of a marketing strategy for Facebook, Inc. (See also Piller, 2001, and Thurlow & Jaworski, 2003, for similar cases of “fake multilingualism” in advertising.)

The Irish and English languages have a tense diglossic relationship in today’s Ireland—a relationship that is often a topic on the translation discussion board. Typically, translators advocate a move away from reliance on and use of the English

language as a starting point for translation. One translator, for example, talked about how Irish should look to other languages when dealing with new technology terminology rather than simply try to replicate the English term. Another translator, sharing this point of view on the “distancing” of Irish from English, commented that English terminology does not have to be literally translated into a number of Irish words if the meaning is clear in the use of one word in Irish for the English language term. These moments illustrate nicely how an additional ideology of “parallel monolingualism” (Heller, 1999) is also at play — the idea that Irish and English should coexist as separate, bounded entities. This marks a clear overlap with the previous “endangerment” ideology, insofar as code mixing and switching are seen as a threat to a minoritized language and evidence of its imminent demise (see Duchêne & Heller, 2007).

Another example of the mixing of these ideologies within the community of translators is to be found in discussions about béarlachas. This term is used to describe Irish words that are seen to be too influenced by the English language; in other words, Anglicism’s. Although, as one translator makes clear, the term “Anglicism” is itself not without polemic:

‘béarlachas’ (the modern translation of which is ‘Anglicism’, while ‘bastardisation’ (the process of corruption or evolution of the meaning of linguistic terms) would be more accurate. (Translator 1, 2008).

Ultimately, what is at stake here is an ideology of “linguistic purism” (Thomas, 1991) by which, in this case, translators seek to clear the Irish language of any English influence. Indeed, I have found béarlachas to be the most frequently occurring issue in discussions. As I indicated above, the issue arises in particular during discussions about new technological terminology, such as “mobile phone” and Facebook “profile.” For example, in one translation of mobile phone as fón póca (literally, “pocket phone”), the use of fón is considered too Anglicized, too close to the English phone. In contrast, another translation of mobile phone is guthán soghluaiste, which is regarded as more “traditional” as it uses the official Irish word for telephone, guthán. This moment quickly sparked an explicit language ideological “debate” (cf. Blommaert, 1999), as in these two posts:

mobile phone should either be guthán soghluaiste or guthán póca (I would argue that ‘fón póca’ is a straight-up english calque and should be avoided in this case) (Translator 2, 2008)

Can we decide once and for all that we are using the term Fón póca for mobile phone, as was decided at the glossary stage ... Regardless of whether guthán póca, etc. is ‘more correct’ - Fón póca was chosen in the first stage - will people stop using terms other than those from the glossary. (Translator 3, 2008)

Another locus of discussions where language ideologies are apparent are those concerning which variety of Irish should be used: an Chaighdeán Oifigiúil or a dialect of Irish, and if the second, which dialect. An Chaighdeán Oifigiúil is the official standard variety of Irish taught in schools, but there are also three main dialects of Irish corresponding to the geographical areas within which they are

spoken: Munster, Connacht, and Ulster. In one discussion, a translator stated how the translation of “I am” should follow an *Chaighdeán Oifigiúil*. However, fellow translators were quick to point out that an *Chaighdeán Oifigiúil* is itself influenced by Munster Irish and that those using Connacht and Ulster Irish do not use or write “I am” in the same way. This eventually led into a discussion of standardness (i.e., standard versus nonstandard) and the politics of translation, with some believing that the standard (Irish) should be for office use and that nonstandard varieties (the dialects) ought to be acceptable, too. Here again, we can see the familiar tensions in endangerment discourses between preserving linguistic diversity in the form of the different dialects and the need to adopt monolingualism, in the form of one official standard, in order to bring a minoritized language to a new mode of use, that of new media.

A final example of the language ideologies involved in the community of translators is the debate over the translator’s choice of language to write in on the discussion board. The majority of the topics and posts on the discussion board are in Irish, but there are some in English, with code switching also evident. On one occasion, a translator took exception to a thread written in English and challenged other translators about their use of English instead of Irish, saying they “should be ashamed.” This purist ideology is also a clear attempt at policing the boundaries of translation and of language (cf. Blommaert et al., 2009). Other translators did disagree with this point of view, however, arguing instead that they did translation because they loved Irish and not because they hated English. One translator also pointed out that they were not ashamed because they speak both Irish and English and that there was nothing inherently wrong with English or being able to make the choice of which language to use. Language policing clearly takes place in the community but not without contestation.

Conclusion

In the specific context of Facebook’s translations application and of the Irish-language translation in particular, we find new media opening up a world of multilingual possibility (cf. Danet and Herring, 2007) but one that is inevitably structured by language policing, verbal hygiene, and a range of language ideological debates about endangerment, purism, parallelism, and so on. Unlike most other bureaucratic sites or processes of translation, however, Facebook translators are not experts chosen by a “topdown” authority to oversee a language according to certain parameters; instead, they come from many different background as students, academics, public representatives, and indeed, professional translators. From the offline world, they bring a combination of expert and lay knowledge about language and about the language they are translating. They also come with their own histories, priorities, and ideologies.

Lurking in the background, but clearly shaping everything, are the language ideologies of Facebook, Inc. itself. The new media are both producers of media texts such as online newspapers and also facilitators of userdriven content such as discussion boards or forums. In my case study, the language ideologies of Facebook, Inc. are part of the metalinguistic discourse/s of Facebook and must be taken into account. Facebook, Inc. is just as implicated in replicating ideologies of endangerment, purism, parallel monolingualism, and of course, monolingualism (fake

or not). To some extent, theirs is a metadiscourse that conceals (or not) an obviously corporate agenda.

As I write this conclusion, Facebook has just announced that it has 500 million users. As someone in the mainstream news media explained it that means that one in every thirteen people in the world is on Facebook. I cannot help but wonder if languages like Walmajarri, Huitotot, Livonian, or Inupiaq will ever be elevated from profile pages to fully fledged “translations.” For all of its self-proclaimed rhetoric, Facebook is a long way from the aspiration, expressed by one employee, to make it “available to everyone, everywhere, in all languages,” just as the “multilingual internet” (cf. Danet & Herring, 2007) is yet to realize itself as a truly universal network. At the end of the day, the language ideologies of both Facebook and the internet itself are inevitably rooted in complex geopolitical realities and historical inequalities.

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