

Multilingualism 2.0: language policies and the use of online translation tools on global platforms

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ABSTRACT

At present, the existing 2.0 Web is far more multilingual than was ever anticipated in the early days of the Internet (Hale, 2014; Hale & Eleta, 2017). Indeed, the increasing variety of languages is a phenomenon that signals the end of the first stages of the digital era in which the Internet was characterized by English-language dominance (Leppänen & Peuronen, 2012). This study primarily aims to present the emerging topics in multilingual research that focus on 2.0 platforms. It presents a literature review and discusses a number of multilingual strategies adopted by different platforms. Five popular platforms have been considered, namely Wikipedia, Facebook, Instagram, Booking.com and TripAdvisor, with close attention paid to travel platforms (and TripAdvisor, in particular). For 2.0 platform providers such as TripAdvisor, multilingualism constitutes a challenge. Typically, these platforms do not opt for an English-only rule, but rather develop linguistic policies in order to accommodate their multilingual users (Cenni & Goethals, 2017). The case of TripAdvisor is particularly striking, not least because it is characterized by the coexistence of two divergent multilingual strategies on the same platform.

Keywords: multilingualism online, 2.0 (travel) platforms, 2.0 platform design, online machine translation, multilingual user-generated content

RESUMEN

En la actualidad, la Web 2.0 tiene un carácter mucho más multilingüe de lo que se anticipó a principios de la era de Internet (Hale, 2014; Hale & Eleta, 2017). De hecho, el progresivo uso de diferentes lenguas es un fenómeno que continúa creciendo, dejando atrás las primeras etapas de la era digital en las que Internet se destacaba por el dominio sin igual del inglés (Leppänen & Peuronen, 2012). El presente estudio tiene como finalidad presentar aquellos temas que emergen en la investigación multilingüe centrada en las plataformas 2.0. Se presenta una revisión bibliográfica, junto con una discusión acerca de diferentes estrategias adoptadas por diversas plataformas. Se analizan cinco plataformas, en concreto Wikipedia, Facebook, Instagram, Booking.com y TripAdvisor. El estudio presta especial atención a las plataformas de viajes, TripAdvisor en particular. Normalmente, estas plataformas no optan por el uso exclusivo del inglés, sino que desarrollan políticas lingüísticas orientadas a incluir a los usuarios multilingües (Cenni & Goethals, 2017). El caso de TripAdvisor es particularmente notable al caracterizarse por dos estrategias multilingües divergentes dentro de la misma plataforma.

Palabras clave: multilingüismo online, plataformas de viaje 2.0, diseño de plataformas 2.0, traducción automatizada online, contenido multilingüe generado a partir de los usuarios

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INTERNET USERS ARE reading and writing in multiple languages as never before, and the percentage of online content written in English is in stable decline (Hale, 2012; 2014). This picture was quite different in the early days of the Internet. During the 1990s, English was the unrivalled language adopted in the digital context, mainly because it represented the language of the vast majority of website developers and users, and English was the language of interaction among speakers of different linguistic backgrounds (Danet & Herring, 2007; Leppänen & Peuronen, 2012). At that time, the linguistic landscape could easily be described as primarily monolingual, with English as the dominant language (Leppänen & Peuronen, 2012). Since then, the range of languages used on the Internet has rapidly and dramatically changed. For instance, other languages like Chinese, the second most-used language online, could challenge the status of English online in a not too far future (Kelly-Holmes & Lenihan, 2017).

Undoubtedly, the online environment has grown into a linguistically plural setting and multilingualism online represents an issue of undeniable importance, especially relevant for platforms where contributions are made by the end users (Hale & Eleta, 2017). Thus, online content is not only generated and consumed in different languages: in the 2.0 digital environment, new multilingual practices are emerging, and new global communication challenges unfold. Even though it remains to be seen how multilingualism will be specifically integrated in different 2.0 platforms in the coming years, and whether a specific language policy will prevail, the analysis of the current multilingual strategies on 2.0 platforms can indicate possible future developments.

In this paper, I shed some light on the multilingual dimension of the 2.0 Internet. First, in Section 2 I offer a brief overview of the most relevant research conducted in literature connected to the ‘multilingual Internet’. Secondly, Section 3 focuses on the multilingual dimension of five of the most popular 2.0 platforms, discussing how these major social networks ‘deal’ with multilingualism in practical terms, delving into their language policies and incorporated online translation tools, as well as providing a literature review of this emerging research theme. Building on this discussion, I also address the question whether a 2.0 platform, such as TripAdvisor, is heading towards more in-group communication between language-specific groups or, instead, towards a channel for global communication. Finally, indications for future research are discussed in section 4.

Multilingualism Online: Main Contributions

In the past two decades, there has been a growing body of research focusing on different facets of multilingualism on the digital environments. By digital environments, “we refer here to digital media platforms that enable the creation, sharing, and exchange of user-generated content and involve social interaction between participants” (Leppänen, Kytölä & Westinen, 2017, p.120). Indeed, social networking sites, as the ones that will be discussed in this contribution, explicitly rely on the concept of mutual exchange of content. From the

early 2000s onwards, an increasing number of investigations focusing on ‘multilingual Internet’ has been published. A crucial publication suggesting the increased interest in this research area is represented by the volume *The Multilingual Internet* (edited by Danet & Herrings, 2007), which contains a collection of papers discussing multilingualism online.

In more recent years, this research topic, which has continued to expand, has been accurately described by Barton & Lee (2017, p.142), who pointed out how studies of multilingualism online, so far, tend to fall into two major categories: quantitative studies of linguistic diversity online and, the investigation of patterns of mixed-language practices in a specific form of computer-mediated-communication (CMC) or across different forms of CMC. Thus, a first stream of research consisted in studies investigating the presence of specific languages on the Internet, mainly concentrating on the distribution of English and other languages (e.g., Paolillo, 2007). While a second broad cluster of studies focused on a detailed analysis of the language use and interaction among multilingual web users, adopting various framework, such as discourse analytic, pragmatic, ethnographic or (socio)linguistic perspectives (e.g., Androutsopoulos, 2010; 2011; 2013; 2014; 2015; Kytölä, 2014; Lee, 2015; 2017; Leppänen & Peuronen, 2012). Key issues explored in this specific research area are represented by linguistic phenomena as language choice (e.g. Androutsopoulos, 2007; Hinrichs, 2006; Lee, 2007; 2014; Tagg & Seargeant, 2012) and code-switching practices (e.g. Lee, 2017; Leppänen, 2007; 2012; Sebba, 2012; Siebenhaar, 2006) adopted by multilingual users communicating in the digital sphere. For a more detailed and extensive discussion of the literature of this first-wave research on multilingualism and the Internet, the reader can refer to the recent works of Barton and Lee (2017) and Leppänen et al. (2017).

Reflecting on the current phase of globalization and the constant and fast advancement of digital communication technology, we have seen social media practices become transcultural and multilingual to an extent never experienced before (Kytölä, 2016; Leppänen, 2012; Peuronen, 2011). These developments influence not only the use of language by web-users, but also the language policies adopted by the different global social media platforms. As a matter of fact, to date, a less discussed area in literature concerns the following issues, namely: how do different 2.0 platforms choose to ‘manage’ multilingualism? Do social networks decide to promote or hinder this feature on their platforms? How? These questions point out some significant emerging themes which are at the moment still relatively under-researched. The discussion of these issues represents the core of this contribution and will be elaborated in the next paragraphs.

Multilingual Features on 2.0 Platforms

At present, multilingualism, which is pervading the vast majority of social media and user-generated content platforms, undoubtedly represents a relevant challenge for platform designers. Indeed, language has become an essential factor to be taken into account when

building or improving a 2.0 platform. Platform designers have to decide how to deal with multilingualism, finding and developing the best ways to adapt their platforms in order to accommodate users of multiple languages.

In general, it is important to notice that 2.0 platforms do not limit their platforms to an English-only rule; instead, they opt for multilingual policies and affordances to deal with users who engage with content in multiple languages (Hale, 2016; Lenihan, 2011). Nonetheless, every platform deals with the issue of multilingualism in its own way, which is characterized by its own mode of communication, discourse and incorporated tools (Lee, 2017).

Wikipedia

The digital and collaborative encyclopedia Wikipedia is available in 299 languages, 11 of which contain over 1,000,000 articles (Wikipedia, 2018). Language is used to organize content by relating articles across languages with interlanguage links (Hale, 2012). On closer inspection, though, it is impossible not to notice the major variation among various language editions. Hecht and Gergle (2010), for instance, found little correspondence of coverage, content or length among same entries written in different languages. Moreover, the majority of articles on Wikipedia exist in one language only (Hale & Eleta, 2017). Thus, the overall consensus on the multilingual character of Wikipedia is that while English clearly has a content advantage, a relevant portion of unique information is available in the different language editions (Bao, Hecht, Carton, Quaderi, Horn & Gergle, 2012). Although Wikipedia “embodies an unprecedented repository of world knowledge diversity in which each language edition contains its own cultural viewpoints on a large number of topics” (Bao et al., 2012, p. 1075), various scholars have described Wikipedia’s multilingualism and promotion of linguistic diversity as a ‘superficial’ one (e.g. Hecht & Gergle, 2010; Lee, 2017), since there is no real interaction or dialogue across languages. In fact, language may even become a kind of barrier, separating content and slowing down the transmission of knowledge and information among users of different linguistic backgrounds (Hale & Eleta, 2017).

Facebook

Facebook also markets itself as global and multilingual. First launched with English-only interfaces (Lee, 2017), Facebook initiated its translation process with Spanish a decade ago and has since been translated into several major languages (Lenihan, 2011; O’Brien, 2011). Indeed, Facebook hopes “to support Facebook in the native language of all our users and people who want to use the site” (Desjardins, 2017, p. 23). Taking a closer look at Facebook’s multilingual policy, we discover that the platform has been mostly translated collaboratively “by soliciting its ‘crowd’, that is the users of the platform” (Desjardins, 2017, p. 23). Facebook has become one of the most successful models of crowdsourced

translated global platform, and thanks to the contributions of its users, it has progressively been able to offer translations of its platform in over 75 languages (Snell-Hornby, 2012).

This crowdsourced translation focuses predominantly on the translation of the platform itself, for instance it has been applied to its interfaces, FAQ sections or guidelines (Desjardins, 2017). In order to further stimulate crowdsourced translations, Facebook even launched an app to sustain this purpose: the Translate Facebook App, underlining in its mission statement how “easy [it is] for translators all over the world to help with the project” (Facebook, 2016). Only recently did Facebook start experimenting with online machine translation. Automatic translation options are now provided through the ‘see translation’ link, for posts written in ‘foreign’ languages, as in languages different from that chosen by the user as the default language.

Finally, despite the undeniable achievements obtained by Facebook in making the platform multilingual, mostly thanks to the collaboration of its users, this unprecedented use of ‘community’/‘crowdsourced’ translation has also brought to light some ethical issues (Desjardins, 2017). Indeed, several scholars started wondering if the use of unprofessional, unpaid ‘translators’ is just, and how this could have an impact on the future of professional translators and of the language service industry in general (e.g. Costales, 2011; Dolmaya, 2011; Fuchs, 2015).

Instagram

Instagram was launched in 2010 and currently ranks as one of the most popular social media world-wide with over 700 million users (Statista 2017). As defined by Lee & Chau (2018, p. 22) “Instagram is an image-/video-sharing [platform] where users snap, post, and share images online instantly”. Users can also follow other Instagram accounts and view their photos (Matey, 2018). Indeed, Instagram promotes active sharing and social networking, and while posting on Instagram, users may at the same time choose to share images on other social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, possibly reaching larger audiences (Lee & Chau 2018).

As the platform’s main functionality consists of users taking photos and posting them online (Matey, 2018), this social media is clearly characterized by a focus on the visual domain. Nonetheless, language-related aspects are progressively gaining importance in the communicative ecology of the platform. A first relevant change in the communicative practice of Instagram is undoubtedly related to the introduction of hashtags in 2011. Hashtags are keywords chosen and defined by the user, prefixed by the # symbol, and “may consist of just one word (#hope) or a string of words written without spaces (#fightfortherighttobefree)” (Lee & Chau 2018, p. 22). Interestingly, hashtags were spread by users before the designers adopted and standardized the practice as an essential characteristic of the platform (Barton, 2015). At the moment, Instagram allows the option of

complementing each post with hashtags (to a maximum number of 30 hashtags per post) (Lee & Chau, 2018).

A second major change in the communicative practice of this social media platform is related to its growing multilingual dimension. As a matter of fact, the Instagram user base community has not only grown extremely fast, it has also reached a global status, counting subscribers from all over the world among its members. In 2016, the platform supported content written in 25 languages, while as of version 8.4 (2018), the number of supported languages has already increased to 40 (Instagram, 2018). In an effort to make it easier for its users to appreciate content from all over the world, sharing posts and following members using different languages, in 2016 the platform decided to incorporate an online translation tool.

The in-built translation tool translates text in bios (the text used by the user to describe him/herself), but also captions relating to, and comments on, the pictures, while hashtags cannot be translated. In practice, a “see translation” link has been added under the text that can be translated, providing a machine translation in the preferred language of the user (the language chosen in their settings). The automatic translation link initially supported major languages, such as French, German, Italian, Russian and Spanish, but is constantly expanding, progressively including “smaller” languages, such as Danish or Afrikaans (Hypertext, 2016).

In its attempt to accommodate an increasing number of its “global” users, in 2017, Instagram decided to reconfigure the entire platform to support languages such as Arabic, Farsi and Hebrew (Instagram, 2017), which are three of the most used languages written from right to left, therefore more complex to include as screen languages of the platform (TechCrunch, 2017).

Multilingualism on Travel Platforms

Travel and tourism has become one of the largest and fastest-growing economic sectors world-wide (UNWTO, 2015). The growing success of the tourism business is not limited to the ‘offline world’ but it is mirrored in the online environment. As a matter of fact, tourism and travel are such widely discussed topics in the Web 2.0 setting that the application of the Web 2.0 to the tourism sector has even received its own label and is now often referred to as Travel 2.0 or e-Tourism (Minazzi, 2015).

Nowadays, users are given the opportunity to share their own views, comments and suggestions in an informal and collaborative way. Hypothetically, every product and service could be rated and commented online by its consumers and, as pointed out by Vásquez (2014, p.1), at present “the number of consumer reviews posted on the Internet has exploded and, as a result, today there are literally billions of reviews that can be found on a variety of websites”. The exponential growth of consumers’ reviews can certainly be witnessed in the field of tourism as well, and in this sector, they are perceived as even more valuable since

they concern intangible “experience” goods (Levy, Duan, & Boo, 2013). More specifically, one of the most consulted, and at the same time produced, forms of user-generated content of the Travel 2.0 environment is “online travel reviews”, as they “represent people’s wish to share their travel experiences online, recommend a tourism product/service or complain about it” (De Ascaniis & Gretzel 2013, p.157).

At the moment, the two most popular tourism-focused platforms are Booking.com and TripAdvisor, which are examined below. These platforms constitute essential sources of pre-purchase information for travelers and they greatly influence the travel decision-making process of its users (Zeher, Crofts & Magnini, 2011). In addition, they represent the digital repository of travelers’ experiences and opinions.

Both platforms have reached such a global status, reaching tourists from all over the world, that they are inevitably confronted with the challenge of multilingualism and the development of an efficient language policy. Indeed, non-English speakers are travelling more and have also become more active online (Hale & Eleta, 2017). This change is also reflected in the user-generated content of these platforms, as the amount of information produced and consumed on these environments is increasingly multilingual. Since both platforms are aware of the great challenge and opportunity that multilingual users bring to their businesses, they are developing different strategies to adapt their services to users from diverse linguistic backgrounds.

Booking.com

Booking.com started as a small Dutch start-up and now provides information in more than 40 languages. In line with the general Booking.com growth, the platform became aware of the need to offer content in different languages and identified machine translation as the most efficient solution to realize this (Levin, Dhanuka & Khalilov, 2017). More specifically, Booking.com is developing an in-house machine translation tool, as customized as possible for the needs of the platform. For many years, machine translation was primarily adopted by the Booking.com translation team in the post-editing stage, in which automatic translation promoted an increase in productivity during the professional translation procedure (Khalilov, 2018). Nonetheless, in this e-commerce environment, the most desirable application of machine translation is direct publishing of machine-translated content (Khalilov, 2018). Booking.com is moving towards this goal, and machine translation is currently being used for translating property descriptions (hotels, apartments, B&Bs, hostels, etc.) from English into any of the other supported languages (Levin et al., 2017). Nonetheless, other sections of Booking.com content are still displayed in the original language without a machine translation. This is the case, for instance, for short evaluations written by the users. As this language policy is still in progress on Booking.com, it is possible to find content written in various languages on a single web page. Although one language may be set for the interface, different languages may well appear in the tourists’ evaluations and in the property

description section. Finally, increasing attention is paid to the concept of ‘localization’, meaning that all translations produced by Booking.com should provide translated content which is the most suitable and appreciated by the different markets, and thus more effective also form a commercial point of view.

TripAdvisor

Launched in 2000 (Lee, Law & Murphy, 2011), it currently welcomes more than 455 million unique monthly visitors, contains 600 million reviews and opinions covering more than 7.5 million accommodations, restaurants, airlines and attractions (TripAdvisor, 2018). Among the specialized customer-review sites in the field of tourism, TripAdvisor is certainly the most popular one. TripAdvisor embodies the largest travel platform where people share knowledge, information and advice about travel services, and it is “one of the first reviews sites to exploit user-generated content” (Vásquez, 2014, p. 8). Starting, as most of the other social networks, as a heavily Anglo-American centered platform, it progressively augmented its supported languages. Indeed, while in 2010, it was possible to read and write reviews in 16 languages and the number of languages increased to 21 by 2013 (Yoo, Sigala & Gretzel, 2016), at present, TripAdvisor provides content in more than 30 languages. This is not a random number but represents the “languages associated with all countries supported by TripAdvisor points of sale” (TripAdvisor, 2018).

The case of TripAdvisor is particularly striking, since it is possible to notice how two opposite strategies dealing with multilingualism are put in place on the same platform (Cenni & Goethals, 2017). Notably, language is a key element in the interactive design of TripAdvisor. On the one hand, users can limit the reading and writing of TripAdvisor reviews to their mother tongue, setting their native language as the preferred one, determining, in this way, a specific review display order. Inevitably, this practice facilitates interactions between users with the same linguistic background (Cenni & Goethals, 2017; Hale, 2016). On the other hand, TripAdvisor incorporated one of the most popular machine-translation tools: Google Translate, which allows users to access and understand reviews written in ‘foreign’ languages, encouraging a more global approach to the communication patterns among the platform users. This example of dual language policy, detected simultaneously on a single social media platform, gives rise to a compelling question related to multilingualism in the Web 2.0 setting, namely whether 2.0 platforms, and TripAdvisor in particular, could further evolve in the direction of linguistically-separated speech communities or in the direction of a globalized one (Cenni & Goethals, 2017).

The constant improvement of online translation tools and the growing awareness of its added value could possibly suggest a trend in the direction of a more global communication mode that dominates 2.0 platforms, especially tourism-focused ones. As a matter of fact, machine translation represents a tool faster and more affordable than ever, able to provide translation immediately as soon as content appears online (Levin et al., 2017). Additionally,

machine translation significantly improves information retrieval (Hale, 2014; Hale & Eleta, 2017). Indeed, speakers of smaller-sized languages (such as Dutch or Swedish, for instance) are not limited in their search of content by their native language, but thanks to online translation, they have the opportunity to engage with foreign-language content and reach information written in the other supported languages. At the same time, those speakers can still use their native language and know that their contribution can be read by other users because of the machine translation tool (Cenni & Goethals, 2017). In the specific case of tourism-focused platforms, this means that tourists never had better and easier access to travel information and guest reviews. In other words, this development enhances the possibility of making informed choices and purchases before your trip.

Finally, it is important to highlight that, through the adoption of machine translation, users are able to interact with multilingual content and, consequently, mutual intelligibility (Lee, 2017), and global communication modes get highly promoted.

Conclusions and Directions for Future Research

In this contribution, I have presented an overview of the main studies that investigate multilingualism in the digital environment. I paid special attention to the (multi)language policies and incorporated translation tools of five major 2.0 platforms, namely Wikipedia, Facebook, Instagram, Booking.com and TripAdvisor. Combining the results from the main research in this area with observations on the latest developments of the platforms themselves, I aimed to stimulate reflection on how the multilingual dimension of these platforms is evolving. The analysis shows clearly that for all five platforms multilingualism has become one of their essential features; and this in contrast to the strong Anglo-American linguistic bias of an earlier period. However, the journey towards multilingualism has been, and continues to be, different for each platform. For instance, Wikipedia and Facebook mostly relied on the contributions and translations by its users, while Instagram, Facebook and TripAdvisor opted for the introduction of online machine translation tools.

Global platforms provide a communication environment in which content is generated from a wide variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Each of these platforms has therefore, developed different kinds of facilities and constraints for multilingual communication, taking into account both their own mission and their user-base. Undoubtedly, platforms have a vested interest in making and keeping their platforms multilingual. Making a platform multilingual is synonymous with making it accessible and thus, ultimately, profitable. At the same time, meeting the linguistic needs of a greater portion of users proves to be positive, not only for service providers, but also for the users, who can participate in the digital arena, consuming and producing content in a multiplicity of languages.

Reflecting on the platforms' journey towards an enhanced multilingualism, we are able to attest to diverging tendencies (Kelly-Holmes & Lenihan, 2017). On the one hand, we

are witnessing an emergence and growth of top-down multilingualism, as evidenced by the speed with which social networks are providing a greater variety of language options for their users (Kelly-Holmes, 2013). On the other hand, bottom-up multilingualism has also emerged, whereby more and more native speakers of different languages are becoming users of global platforms and are eager to access content provided not only in their own, but also in other, languages. There is also a conjunction of these two practices online, whereby platform users embody both the “source and resource” for multilingualism online (Kelly-Holmes & Lenihan, 2017), as discussed in the case of Facebook “outsourcing” their translation work on behalf of their communities of users (crowdsourcing).

Building on studies conducted to date, there is a growing demand for longitudinal studies that investigate the evolution of different tools and phenomena. For instance, a relevant area for future research would be to investigate the long-term impact of crowdsourcing on the multilingual dimension of the web (Kelly-Holmes & Lenihan, 2017), in particular relating to smaller-scale languages, which, at present, are the languages that have less access to (machine-)translated content. In addition, future studies might investigate how the different multilingual affordances are perceived and made use of by the actual users, thus focusing on the users’ perspective.

Finally, platform designers join scholars in realizing how integrating machine-translation tools in 2.0 platforms may dramatically increase translation efficiency and, at the same time, substantially boost intercultural communication. Therefore, it is of fundamental importance to monitor the development of online machine-translation tools adopted by the different platforms, and examine how the evolution of this technology can influence multilingualism on global platforms.

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