Caught Between Fantasy and Reality: The Cosmopolitan Promise of Translation Apps

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Abstract *Translation apps appear to be the ideal technical companion for world-wide connections in public and private domains. They promise to facilitate communication across language (and cultural) barriers, removing a key obstacle to international understanding. In this sense, they hold the cosmopolitan promise of bringing together people of different backgrounds, cultures, and languages. However, the widespread availability and use of such language technologies comes with certain notable limitations. There is a gap between user expectations, marketing strategies, usability and availability, which can result in the tool triggering shifts – for better or for worse – in the interpersonal relations of the interlocutors. In this chapter, we present and discuss the current state of research and developments of translation apps regarding their useability. We outline the scope of translation apps by comparing them to human interpreting and conclude that the cosmopolitan promise of translation apps is an oversimplification.*

Introduction

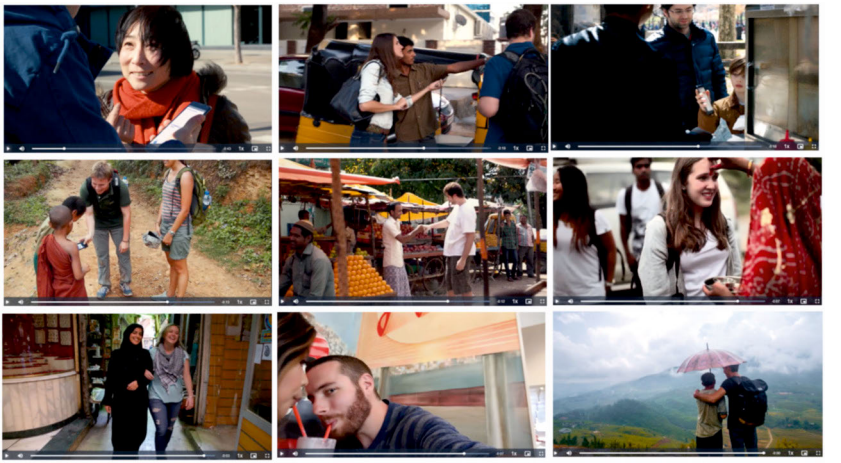
The velocity at which our everyday world has been changing since the 1990s is astonishing. Due to digitalization and globalization, old habits and certainties no longer retain their earlier validity. We live in a "VUCA" world (Prensky, 2014: 64), which is volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. It is no coincidence that Beck (1986) speaks of the transition from the first industrial modernity to a second reflexive modernity and a "risk and internet age"[1] in which "the world becomes a horizon for daily references and a space of new inequalities and new options for action". Accordingly, all social agents, whether they wish or not, are "forced to expand their horizons of perception and action" (Beck & Grande, 2010: 196). These massive social upheavals affect not least the intensity of intercultural communication, which has long since ceased to be a special case of communication but has become an everyday practice

1 All translations by the authors.

for many people. A typical challenge in intercultural encounters is undoubtedly the handling of linguistic barriers.

However, technological development promises something substantial, namely a tool that initially appears to bridge all linguistic and then all cultural boundaries, to turn strangers into friends and to ensure that the individual and society reach a new level of being in a (techno-)evolutionary sense, at least if you believe the siren calls of advertising. We are talking about translation apps. Take, for example, the *Google Translate* Superbowl Commercial of 2019:

Fig. 1: 100 Billion words – Superbowl Commercial 2019. Compilation of images.



This prototypical advertisement for a translation app obviously and exclusively addresses Westerners, who not only reach (exoticized) places that were inaccessible without the digital shoulder of the translation app to lean on, but also make worldwide friends or even engage in love affairs with a playful ease and avoiding any form of cultural misunderstanding or shock.

First of all, a transnational encounter is evidence of globalization. However, within the discourse of globalization references to plurality and self-problematizations have to be made, and we can also begin to think in terms of a (critical) cosmopolitanism (Delanty, 2008: 220), as a byproduct of globalization. In the advertisement, a model-like version of a cosmopolitan person (according to the colloquial usage of the term cosmopolitanism) is shown, and it seems to suggest that being cosmopolitan is a result of life choices, at least "a function of coerced choices or a side-effect of unconscious decisions" (Beck & Sznaider, 2006: 387). The people shown in the advertisement are world travellers who show facets of cos-

mopolitan attitudes. For example, they are seemingly interested in making pleasant acquaintances, identifiable as a cosmopolitan attitude of the interest in the "quality of social embedding" (Petzold, 2013: 53) and they seem to be in line with Woodward and Skribis' (2012: 129–130) characterization of cosmopolitans as being "open to diversity, interested in global issues, flexible, able to know, command and enact a variety of cultural knowledges, repertoires and practices." The cosmopolitanism portrayed here goes beyond mere globalization but gives a view of globality through the eyes of people who are acting on a local level (Delanty 2008: 218; 220). It does not remain at the level of antique cosmopolitan ideals and moralizing projections but sheds light on banal global encounters, on a "wide range of cultural, social and political currents" (Delanty, 2008: 218). However, the cosmopolitan promise displayed in the advertisement still remains superficial – as indeed depths of characters in advertisements generally are. The objective of behaviour seems to focus only on fulfilling one's own self-centred motives (joy in travelling, extreme experiences, social needs) and not on fundamentally identifying with humanity (Antweiler, 2011: 72) or taking care or feeling responsible for all people on the globe (Appiah, 2007: 15). Furthermore, cosmopolitanism is reproduced here as an elitist concept, which "associates with privileged elites who possess higher educational levels, incomes […] and command resources – financial, cultural, social – that enhance mobility of various kinds" (Woodward & Skrbis 2012: 129). The advertisement is also telling a neocolonial narrative in which kind, helpful but primitive non-Western, non-elite figures ("relatively non-intellectual, immobile and working-class" (Woodward & Skrbis, 2012: 129)) appear, using the romanticizing and (since the time of Rousseau) unmoving motif of the "noble savage" (Dabydeen et al., 2007), which also is reproduced on TV screens (Peters-Little, 2003). Following the narration of this Western-centred advertisement that is addressed to a Western audience, for non-Westerners, cosmopolitanism becomes an option only as a result of a foreign-induced cultural contact with the technologically superior sphere (rich, well-educated, white). Thus, the questioned promise is, so to speak, attached to a self-serving and chauvinistic cosmopolitanism from above and, thus, the counterpoint to a cosmopolitanism from below (Appadurai, 2001; Kurasawa, 2004).

Translation Apps as a Postdigital Tool

Translation apps first appeared in 2006 (Hoberg, 2022: 43; Wang et al., 2022: 143–144). The translational process was initially based on sequential, statistical methods (Kenny, 2022: 36–39). In 2015, a fundamental change took place with the replacement of statistical machine translation methods by neural machine translation (Kenny, 2022: 39). In this way, translation machines are continuously trained and make use of neural networks, predicting probabilities of words and sequences

based on a mathematical function. This milestone helped translation apps to achieve their breakthrough (Wang et al., 2022: 143–144). For the first time, the quality of machine translation was said to be equivalent to human translation (Kenny, 2022: 39). Thanks to the smartphone, machine translation is nowadays available everywhere. Here, we are particularly interested in the study of translation apps for spoken language and for ordinary, everyday situations. Scientific publications shed light not only on the linguistic quality, strengths, and weaknesses of translation apps, but also – more relevant for scholars of a sociocultural studies background – on the consequences for interactional dynamics and situated interpersonal relations that are evoked by using digital tools.

Translation apps or their browser versions are now ubiquitously available on every smartphone, and they promise to be able to translate any type of communication accurately at any time, thereby opening up unimagined paths, contacts and possibilities for their users. By this, they are stylized into a cyborg-like extension of human communication, a virtual arm that in solidarity supports humans. Digital communication intervenes directly in analogue interaction, and virtual bits and bytes have practical everyday consequences in activities such as shopping, visiting sights, or live translations of a medical diagnosis. Not least thanks to translation apps, "the internet is enabling qualitatively new levels and types of proactivity and 'co-production' in consumer culture" (Roche, 2012: 545).

Once again, digital and analogue communication and behaviour are blurring and hybridizing, showing that we are indeed in a postdigital present. The "post" here does not mean that the digital era has been overcome, but that we have reached a phase in which societal transformations have already significantly taken place, and the digital is inseparable from the social and interpersonal communication and everyday practice (Cramer, 2014: 13). The dichotomy (Thelwall, 2013: 69–70) or the dualism (Ess & Consalvo, 2011: 3) between an online world and a supposedly "real" offline world has now been dissolved and has given way to the recognition that the "web plays a role in many offline activities" (Thelwall, 2013: 69). In the following sections, we will outline some of the communicative practices that emerge around translation apps, and the effects they have on communication across language barriers. Our review of the literature provides evidence that – in contrast to the aforementioned advertisements – these tools are widely used in contexts of "cosmopolitanism from below", i.e. by refugees, migrant workers, and other non-elite travellers.

On the Usability of Translation Apps

Contrary to what the tech companies' commercials promise, there are several reasons why the usability of translation apps is limited. Both the available language combinations and the quality of the translations and usability for certain usage con-

texts vary considerably. In addition, users should be aware of data protection issues, for example when data is transferred to non-EU countries. Furthermore, the usage of translation apps can be de facto impeded in certain work environments due to the risk of violation of data protection legislation.

A key technical reason for the limited availability of machine translation for "small" languages lies in the "transformer" architecture, which is currently the most common and powerful method for the neural, parallel processing of language data. This system requires large amounts of texts in source and target languages, which are used as training data (cf. Krüger, 2021; Delorme Benites & Lehr, 2021: 52). The training of the machines is based on the approach of distributional semantics. This approach assumes that the meaning of words can be derived from their occurrence in large amounts of text (Krüger, 2021: 284; Boleda, 2020) and expressed in numerical values (vectors). In an abstract sense, the vectors indicate the relationships between words. Using the training data, the machines learn something about the properties of words and how to translate them into other languages. For this to be successful, however, the training data must have been translated by humans, or at least to have been in a controlled translation relation to each other. Obtaining such multilingual, translated data in large quantities represents a considerable challenge for the further development of machine translation systems.

We cannot and do not want to evaluate the theoretical approach of language models in this chapter. However, it seems to us to be of central importance that the composition and the translation relations in the training data determine their quality and, thus, the limits of the machine's learning process. If the amount of data is too small or the texts differ too much from one another, the model develops false assumptions regarding the combinability and translatability of certain words and sentence structures. This means that languages of smaller communities or without a writing system are inevitably absent or underrepresented in current language models, while languages that are widely spread throughout the world are favoured (Schneider, 2022). In addition, the training data is generally based on written texts and therefore deviates more or less significantly from oral language use, which is an undoubted weak spot of *translation* apps as they treat the input utterances of app users as if they were products of written and not of oral communication. The usage contexts stored in the language models can also only be those for which numerous digitized texts are available, such as legal texts or technical documentation.

Due to the composition of the training data, language models are therefore limited in three ways: Only certain languages are even available, they are trained for written texts which differ from oral language use, and only texts with certain communicative functions and a specific vocabulary are available. Until recently, machine translation was, therefore, only possible for around 130 languages. The vast majority of these languages can only be machine translated to a limited extent. Machine translation is currently only efficient and can be used for a wider range of commu-

nicative tasks in only certain combinations and translation directions that are low in number, such as English – Italian.

The A.I. researchers based at *META Platform Inc.* itself (the group owning Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and more social media platforms) created a data mining project called *No language left behind* to develop language models for numerous "low resource languages", i.e. languages that are in some way underrepresented in the postdigital world (regardless of the size of the speaker group) (META, 2022). Languages for which fewer than one million publicly available and translated example sentences exist are therefore considered "low resource" (see also Schneider 2022, on such classifications). The overarching goal is to enable machine translation for more languages than before. META claims to have "evaluated, high-quality translations directly between 200 languages" (META, 2022). The new language model (NLLB-200) based on the FLORES-200 dataset may lead to greater availability of machine translation for different, formerly underrepresented languages.

A study by Liebling et al. (2020) has looked at the usability of translation apps from the perspective of certain user types. The team of authors consisted mainly of researchers from Google and examined the requirements that different target groups, such as tourists or immigrants, place on translation apps. It became clear that translation apps play a much more important role in the lives of immigrants in particular and are used by them in contexts with high social relevance.

While advertising for translation apps tends to show situations that originate in the lives of Western elites (travelling, getting to know foreign cultures, maintaining friendships across continents), migrant users predominantly use the apps in elementary everyday communication contexts, such as work, medical care, and housing. So, while tourists rarely communicate in constellations that require a higher and unpredictable level of communicative competence, such constellations were very present in the lives of migrant users. Overcoming the language barrier was a much more important challenge for them, one they confront on a daily basis. Translation apps were used alongside other ways of translation, such as multilingual relatives or people who simply happened to be present. The importance of digital tools for migrants became particularly clear in the statement of one participant: "when you arrive here, the only tool you have is the cell […] it's my right hand" (Liebling et al., 2020: 134).

Based on the importance of translation apps for immigrant users, the study identifies contexts in which the apps are only of limited help. These include longer conversations or the use of text recognition via camera, which sometimes produces incorrect and incomplete translations. In addition to translation errors, the handling of dialectal pronunciation and the lack of specific vocabulary were also perceived as problematic, particularly in work contexts. Added to this was the fact that the device caused delays in the flow of conversation and generally hindered the formation of relationships between the interaction partners. Due to these prob-

lems, some of the interviewees also reported a lack of social acceptance of the apps among communication partners who belong to linguistic majorities. In these cases, speakers from linguistic majorities reject the use of translation apps because they don't feel comfortable using them.

The authors therefore outline four areas in which translation apps need to be adapted more closely to user needs: (1) use by people with a low level of literacy; (2) greater consideration of dialectal variation in speech recognition ("explore regional variation in speech data across different languages to improve recognition", Liebling et al., 2020: 135); (3) consideration of natural conversation patterns ("touch-free conversation"); and (4) context-related training methods ("allowing the user to explicitly or implicitly bias the model based on location should improve quality", Liebling et al., 2020: 135). The aim is to improve the usability of translation apps by incorporating these areas more closely into their further development.

Limitations of translation applications are addressed in further studies. Ji et al. (2021) present a meta-study for the healthcare sector, reviewing empirical studies on the use of machine translation in clinical settings – again, having in mind everyday and non-elite situations and speakers. They conclude the fact that "in-app translations facilitate access but risk inaccuracies with important medico-legal considerations" (Ji et al., 2021: 1). Similarly, Herrmann-Werner et al. (2021) investigate the use of translation apps in simulated clinical encounters with medical students. Participants in the study rated apps only seldomly as helpful, recommendable, and applicable: "Free-text responses revealed several concerns about translation errors that could jeopardize diagnostic decisions" (Herrmann-Werner et al., 2021: 1). However, students also claimed that translation apps are still the best option when professional interpreting is unavailable.

A qualitative study by İkizoğlu (2019) explores the role of the app in an everyday family conversation. She examines a 30-minute sequence in which the app translates from English and Turkish between a mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law. On the one hand, the app is the object for conveying the messages; on the other hand, it becomes the subject of the discourse when, for example, the validity of the translation is questioned. Thus, the author shows "how the app is constituted as a participant in the interaction" to the extent that it fulfils different roles in interaction, and as an object to the extent that it "aids the human participants to fulfil those roles themselves."

The brief review of studies on the use and usability of translation apps shows that machine translation is sometimes of limited help in multilingual conversations. The availability and quality of the translation is a key point in these investigations, but also the very practical impacts on usability and interpersonal relations are aspects of interest when evaluating the promise of translation apps. In the following section, we will outline the systematic differences between translation apps and hu-

man translation, highlighting the central role of human interpreters in organizing and coordinating interaction between the primary participants.

Typical Features of Interpreter-Mediated Conversation

The limitations of translation apps in complex everyday conversations become even clearer when one considers the basic characteristics of everyday conversations between people and the changes that result from the inclusion of a third party, the interpreter. While approaches such as distributional semantics focus primarily on the lexicon of a language and consider words as entities with more or less stable relations and properties, action-oriented, social science-inspired approaches from pragmatics and conversation analysis focus on the interaction process between the participants.

In this latter perspective, the meaning of words in the context of linguistic actions is understood dynamically as co-construction, in the sense that contexts and interpretative frameworks must be jointly established by the participants. Participants in a conversation thus actively establish the order of the interaction again and again. They are constantly indicating that they are still interacting, what they are talking about, why they are doing so, etc. (see e.g. Mazeland, 2006). Accordingly, misunderstandings result from a lack of convergence in these coordination activities and generate their own repair sequences in which the lack of agreement is then dealt with: If, for example, a joke or an ironic remark is not understood as such by another person, a speaker can repair this afterwards by explicitly labelling his utterance as ironic and thus making the situation socially acceptable. Listeners have a special role to play here, as they actively contribute to the orderly progression of the conversation through interjections, but also through gestures and other non-verbal cues (Duncan, 1972). In the case of jokes, it is important to elicit laughter, and, as we all know, sometimes laughter is not based on sincere amusement. Sincere or not, laughter constructs the previous turn as a joke or as funny. In the case of usage of a translation app, this natural communicative process of exchanging cues is interrupted and denaturalized.

When a human interpreter is present and involved in a conversation, he or she often takes on some of the communicative tasks that would otherwise be done by the primary participants themselves, such as allocating speaking rights or taking turns. What is more, the interpreter can also articulate his or her own comprehension problems or point out possible misunderstandings. Thus, studies on consecutive dialogue interpreting show that interpreters play a crucial role as co-actors in triadic exchanges to facilitate communication when there is a language barrier (e.g. Angermeyer & Meyer, 2021; Bolden, 2000). In her pioneering work on dialogue interpreting, Wadensjö (1998, 2015) distinguished between implicit and explicit coor-

dination done by interpreters. Baraldi and Gavioli (2012) have further developed this distinction by proposing the concept of basal and reflexive coordination (associating the latter with intercultural mediation). The overall aim is to focus attention on the participant status of human interpreters and the role they play to enhance effective communication and achieve understanding. Implicit or basic coordination is closely related to the task of translation and the two-way flow of conversation as linguistic action. In contrast, explicit coordinating moves have no counterpart in a preceding sequence of a primary conversational partner (i.e. non-renditions). Thus, they are created by the interpreter him- or herself to add vital information, clear up misunderstandings or facilitate communication in other ways. A typical case of explicit coordination is a clearing sequence in which an interpreter asks for clarification in order to better understand what primary participants are talking about.

Explicit coordinating moves may vary in form and function, but they serve principally to organize a continuing communicative process (including interpreting activities) and to smoothen its flow. Merlini (2015: 106) classifies such manifest coordination as a "metacommunicative activity, whose aim is [also] to resolve communication problems by, for instance, clarifying, expanding, repairing, questioning, or formulating understanding of the meaning of conversational actions." In the light of this classification, it is clear that dialogue interpreting is "a complex activity that cannot be understood as the straightforward rendering of other people's talk in another language" (Bolden, 2000: 415). Bolden shows how "interpreters' actions are shaped not only by other people's talk, but also by their own independent analysis of the ongoing activity and the specific requirements it poses for the participants." Clarification-seeking and information-eliciting actions in the dyadic exchanges with one of the interlocutors (e.g. side sequences) are therefore regarded as an integral part of the interpreting process that help to achieve the goals of a communicative event (Bolden, 2000: 391–393, 414–415).

Given the critical and complex tasks that interpreters perform in interpreter-mediated conversations, the remaining shortcomings of conversations mediated by translation apps are not surprising. Obviously, translation apps are not capable of mediating and guiding communication in the same way as a human interpreter. However, given the ubiquitous nature of these technologies, it seems promising to study how users manage to communicate with the help of translation apps despite the obvious shortcomings. Rather than focusing on the difficulties and errors alone, we suggest looking at the communicative practices that emerge around these technologies. This appears even more promising as – according to a review by Liebling et al. (2020: 134) – it has been rarely undertaken up to now. In the next section we therefore present short excerpts from conversations in which a translation app is employed, in order to highlight some of the communicative practices that emerge due to the involvement of the app.

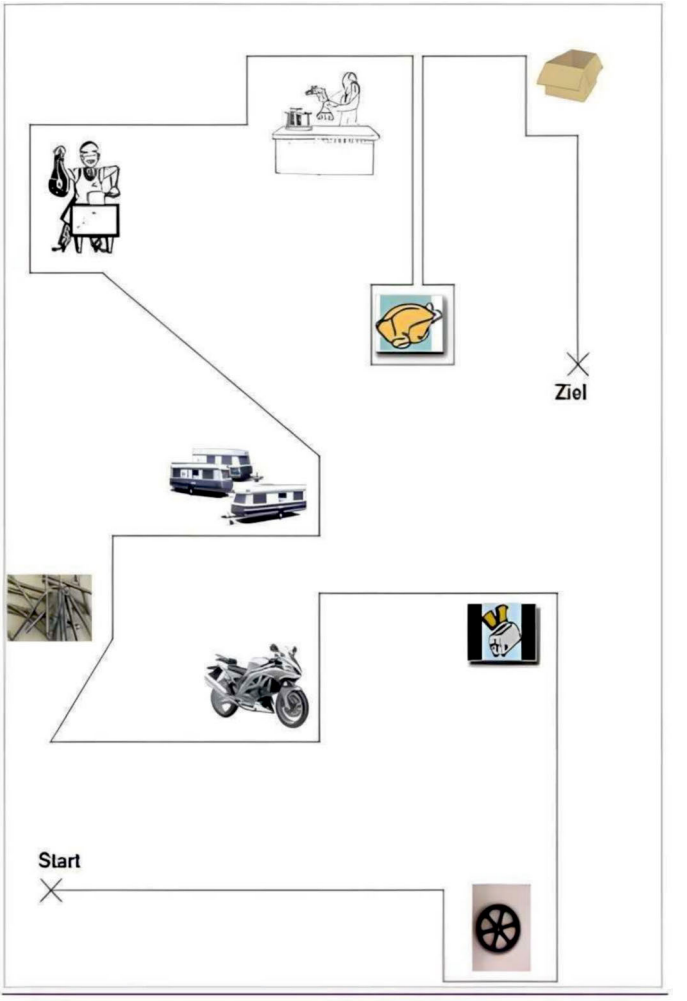
"What's your Name? Enchanted Pillar!"

In this section, we discuss short excerpts from dialogues based on a Map Task experiment which was carried out at the University of Mainz in 2019. A Map Task is designed to elicit spontaneous speech and discourse between two participants. According to the Human Communication Research Centre (2008) (University of Edinburgh), it is described as follows: "The Map Task is a cooperative task involving two participants. The two speakers sit opposite one another, and each has a map which the other cannot see. One speaker – designated the Instruction Giver – has a route marked on her map; the other speaker – the Instruction Follower – has no route. The speakers are told that their goal is to reproduce the Instruction Giver's route on the Instruction Follower's map. The maps are not identical, and the speakers are told this explicitly at the beginning of their first session. It is, however, up to them to discover how the two maps differ."

In Fig. 2, we present the map used in the experiment we refer to. It consists of items and drawings that represent shared knowledge in most cases (i.e. a wheel, a toaster, a number of nails). However, some drawings are not necessarily based on shared knowledge, such as the image of a butcher or the three caravan trailers. These are possible trouble sources for participants who come from different cultural and social backgrounds and lack a common base of cultural knowledge and associated connotations with respect to the pictured items.

In excerpt 1, Dimitri and Ali's command of German is good, and they carry out the task of instruction giving and following with confidence. Ali instructs Dimitri without further ado or greeting. There is only a minor sign of confusion in line 5, when Dimitri claims „Ach ah ja!" (*Oh, oh yes*). This is probably due to the instruction to "draw a line" (Line 4: *You draw a line in that direction*.).

Fig. 2: Map Task-map



Excerpt 1: Map task with two non-native speakers

Line	Participant	Original turns (German)	English translation
1	Dimitri	Okay.	Okay.
2	Ali	Äh Beim Startzeichen unter dem Startwort fängst du an.	Uh you should begin at the start sign beneath the word "start".
3	Dimitri	Hmhm.	Uhum. (*affirmative*)
4	Ali	Dann gehst du rechts rüber in Richtung äh des Rades. ((1,6s)) Dort ziehst du ne Linie rüber. Und äh…	Then you go to the right in direction uh of the wheel. You draw a line in that direction. And uh..
5	Dimitri	((lacht kurz)) Ach, ah ja! Auch klar. Wo ein Rad sein soll. Okay.	((Short laughter)) Oh, oh yes! It's clear. Where there is a wheel. Okay.

Excerpt 1 shows how the start of the experiment is handled when there is no language barrier. The participants start immediately with the task, and there is no sign of confusion. Minor difficulties or irritations do not disrupt the interaction process.

This is different in excerpt 2, where participants Markus and Pilar have serious difficulties getting started with the task. Markus is a native German speaker and does not speak Spanish. Pilar is a native Spanish speaker and has no command of German. In this case, the map task was supplemented by a real language barrier and a translation app (Google translate) on a smartphone to act as a translator. Participants were instructed to complete the task using only the app. No other options (such as using English as a lingua franca) were allowed.

Markus starts the conversation in line 1 by introducing himself and asking for Pilar's name. This is translated by the app in line 2 with a slight delay of 1,5 seconds. Pilar activates the app choosing Spanish in the conversation mode. This creates a slight delay of 2,5 seconds. Then she responds with a greeting, her name, and the polite Spanish formula "encantada" (English: "Nice to meet you."). Her turn consists of three utterances. The app translates her turn (Spanish: "… Pilar, encantada") into German as "verzauberte Säule" ("enchanted pillar") in line 4. This is interesting in several ways: The app knows that the answer to the question "What's your name?" can simply be a name, and deletes the greeting ("Hola"). However, the app does not know that a name does not need to be translated. Also, the app does not know that "Enchanted Pillar" is probably not a person's name. It is also interesting to note that the exotic answer "enchanted pillar" does not cause much confusion in line 5, when Markus continues with the task. The only small sign of trouble is his laughter. Then he immediately switches to the Map Task, points Pilar to the wheel, and tells her to go there. The following translation in line 6 is somehow flawed in several ways and

causes Pilar to ask for clarification in line 7. Her question is again mistranslated, and this struggle with flawed and misleading instructions and questions goes on for quite some time.

Excerpt 2: map task with two native speakers and app support

Line	Participant	Original turns (German, Spanish)	English translation
1	Markus	Hallo! Ich bin Markus. Äh wie heißt du?	Hello! I am Markus. Uh what's your name?
2	App	*((1,5s)) ¡Hola! Soy Markus. Como te llamas?*	*Hello! I am Markus. What's your name?*
3	Pilar	((2,5s)) ¡Hola! Me llamo Pilar. Encantada!	Hello! My name is Pilar. Nice to meet you!
4	App	*((1,5s)) Verzauberte Säule.*	*Enchanted pillar.*
5	Markus	((2s)) ((Laughs)) Okay. Ähm fangen wir an! Äh zu deiner Rechten siehst du ein Rad. Ähm gehe geradewegs auf das Rad zu.	*Okay. Uhm lets start! Uh on your right you see a wheel. Uhm go straight towards to the wheel.*
6	App	*((2s)) Bueno. ¡Comencemos con tu mano derecha! ¡Eres una bicicleta que va directo al volante!*	*Allright. Let's start with your right hand! You're a bicycle that goes straight to the wheel!*
7	Pilar	(2s)) ¿Quieres decir que tengo que dirigirme hacia la moto?	You mean I have to head for the motorcycle?
8	App	*Du meinst, ich muss auf's Fahrrad!*	*You mean I have to get on the bike!*

Comparing the same section of the Map Task with Ali and Dimitri on the one hand, and Markus and Pilar on the other, it becomes clear that the latter had to adapt to the specific challenges of the application first, instead of working on the Map Task. They did this by ignoring certain phenomena (e.g. the inadequate translation of a name) or by asking clarifying questions. Later in the interaction, they also used simplified language to avoid mistranslations or gestures to bypass the app. Each step of the task was tedious and cumbersome and took much more time than for the team that did not face a language barrier.

Conclusions

Translation apps are without doubt a postdigital tool, expanding the virtual sphere into the material, and vice-versa. To a certain extent they may also be seen as a cosmopolitan tool. At least they appear as one in their advertising, which addresses cosmopolitans or, ostensibly, Western elites who present themselves as cosmopolitans. However, our short review of the promises and challenges associated with translation apps showed that they are not yet able to meet all of these expectations. Translation apps are helpful for certain tasks and language constellations, and, at the same time, problematic, inadequate, or simply not available for others. Public discourses sometimes seem to overestimate the capacities of translation apps, and users first need to learn how to work with these technologies in specific situations. However, reports from different research settings also show that translation apps are already part of postdigital lifeworlds, especially those of migrant workers or refugees. Here, they often seem to play an important role for migrants who suffer from language barriers while finding their way in host societies. In this manner, they can be seen as a banal cosmopolitan tool from below.

The communicative effects of translation apps on mediated interactions seem to be caused not only by mistranslations but also by delays and a general slowing down of the interaction, unfamiliar written language registers, and a general tendency of users to focus more on the app than on the interlocutor. Thus, apps intervene significantly in the interpersonal dynamics of communication – in a good way but also in a bad way – resulting in curiosity but also in cautious restraint regarding the willingness to give yourself fully into the hands of the digital. A major problem seems to be that the apps are not (yet?) able to monitor ongoing communication, comment on possible misunderstandings, practise recipient design for specific addressees, or point out possible ambiguities to the primary participants. Thus, the familiarity and logic of natural, situated communication is still not fully met by the digital tool. In conversations that require translation, the ability to practice reflexive coordination will probably remain the domain of human interpreters. Obviously, translation apps facilitate communication across language barriers and will gain ground as ubiquitous facilitators of intercultural encounters in the future, but at the same time, their technical limits cannot be overlooked, and it remains an open question in which contexts they are really able to replace human facilitators of communication.

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