Knowledge Organization as Translation Praxis

The true story of my death has already been written! It is inscribed on one or several pages in a book sitting on a shelf in a hexagonal room in the world's most comprehensive library. If I only had the room number, volume, and page numbers, I could access it and read the sequence of events that lead to my demise. In this library "all the world's knowledge" can be found. However, it is inaccessible, not because the library itself cannot be found and accessed, but because it lacks a proper classification system. It is as if we were trying to find a specific website but did not have a description to enter into a Google search query. We could spend years looking for it. Because we have no specificity or description to offer, we cannot access the website even though we are certain of its existence.

Jorge Luis Borges (1998) wrote a short essay titled "The Library of Babel," which is a vast library wherein among a great many stories, you can find "the true story of your death" (p. 115). However, according to Borges, the library is so immense that you would also find everything that has already been written as well as everything that will ever be written. Borges begins his essay by equating this library to the universe. How can one ever find what one is looking for in such vastness? Fear not, there is a fabled volume in this library that promises the perfect catalog or classification codex that makes sense of the entire library. Borges (1998) writes that "On some shelf . . . there must exist a book that is the cipher and perfect compendium of all other books, and some librarian must have examined that book; this librarian is analogous to a god" (Borges, 1998, p. 116). Borges is describing a perfect catalog of all knowledge and recognizes the awesome power the catalog bestows upon the librarian who uses it.

This paper characterizes the top-down universalist classification system as an illusion of "godlike powers" conferred upon the librarian in contrast to localist approaches to knowledge organization. I argue that the classification of knowledge is more powerful than the production of knowledge because it regulates its access and as such brings it into present existence. Where this power/knowledge resides and how it is distributed speak of a justice system. Therefore, if we are to collectively construct a catalog, not only must we allow for autochthonous ways of knowing in its design, usage, and administration, but also recognize that their coalescence will necessitate an ongoing ethical translation praxis. This essay employs translation concepts as a provocation to theorize about less violent ways of constructing and classifying knowledge that can result in more equitable systems of knowledge organization. This essay is not a comprehensive point of departure from what we already know nor does it constitute a theory in itself. If it is anything, it is a loose page from the windy fields of Translation Studies whirling its way to our own (information studies).

The God Librarian

There is hardly any living being more godlike than one who possesses the power of divinity. Having the ability to relate anyone's true story of their death, especially before it occurs, can exalt the knower to deity status. However, Borges does not situate the site of godlike powers within this ability of divinity exactly but within the ability to locate and decipher the library of all possible knowledges. The subtle difference being that the librarian does not possess all existing knowledges herself, only the ability to reference them through the library. The expanse of knowledge as large as the universe needs a form of apprehension, i.e. a classification system. As "The Library of Babel" describes, knowledge already exists out there in the world, and in documentalist terms, Michael Buckland (2017) asks, "How are we to discover among the very many unknown documents which, if any, are important for us for some purpose, and how are we to find a copy of any identified wanted document?" (p. 71). The problem Buckland identified has to do with specificity in time and space. It is not enough that we know where the knowledge resides. For the God Librarian, access has a temporal dimension as well. Specific knowledge would be most helpful at the right time and within the right space, or to which Buckland (2017) refers as context: "Even scientific facts cannot be properly understood out of context, which has large consequences for anyone imagining that a technological system of total recall could be sufficient" (p. 41). It is not enough that we know the true story of our death, we must be able to know it in the context of salvation, redemption, love, and/or peace, whichever is most relevant for us in our time (Wilson, 1968, pp. 18–19). However, Buckland (2017) brings us down from our godlike aspirations and plants our feet squarely on the ground: "The information explosion would not matter if we always had at hand the most suitable documents whenever we wanted or needed them, but that is most unlikely" (p. 72).

The recent and continual overflow of information has catalyzed a desire to find the God Librarian's catalog: a universal system that bounds all knowledge in a language that humans can understand. One such attempt is the Universal Decimal Classification (UDC) schema. The UDC is ". . . an elaborate artificial language . . . [created] to describe each item in detail and to show how each [is] related by topic, date, and origin to each other item" (Buckland, 2017, p. 40). Paul Otlet and Henri La Fontaine were instrumental in contributing to the notion that knowledge could be cataloged exemplified by their creations of the Universal Bibliographic Repertory, also known as *Repertoire Bibliographique Universel* (RBU) and the UDC (Buckland 2017, p. 39). Their work revolved around the notion that the Library of Babel, metaphorically speaking, could be cataloged, and accessed in one place, but as Buckland (2017) points out, "it [is] . . . a utopian view based on a simplistic view of knowledge" (p. 41).

The universality of knowledge is an aspiration to become a demigod because it implies that all knowledge is a closed system and capable of being bound within the cognitive powers of one human body. This viewpoint does not allow for destabilizing or unclassifiable knowledges and connotes an understanding of all its content. It harkens back to Enlightenment ideals of absolute truth, teleology, and perfection, all of which have proved repressive throughout history. The universality of knowledge flattens the universe into one mode of understanding and encases it within the inscriptions of hegemonic languages. This view is a top-down, paternalistic approach that infantilizes cultures, particularly those which have been marginalized. Culturally, it makes singular all the pluralities that exist and presupposes translatability. More pragmatically, it closes off possibilities and returns a univocal diction to the world established at the heart of bureaucratic institutions. In *Whose Global Village? Rethinking How Technology Shapes Our World*, Ramesh Srinivasan (2017) wrote:

> Bureaucratic and institutional approaches toward documenting, collecting, and preserving may ignore the perspectives of the people they are supposed to represent. Technologies that follow these top-down principles support the values of those in power while ignoring the voices of diverse communities. (pp. 8–9)

Srinivasan speaks of a top-down approach to knowledge organization and warns us of the historic dangers foisted upon those peoples that are not at the top. In other words, most institutional knowledge organizational technologies—as extensions of human memory—obstruct epistemic pluralism and rampantly reproduce the problem. Leazer (2021) has pointed out that the rationalization for a universal system of knowledge hinges on the weak assumption that translation between "divergent views" (p. 614) is perfectly possible, or what he refers to as reconcilable. Therefore, seriously addressing these assumptions about translation is not only necessary but part of the ethical approach to a plurality of ethical solutions.

"The Library of Babel" was inspired by the Christian biblical story of the "Tower of Babel" narrating a human attempt to construct a tower so high that it would reach the heavens only before God's wrath stops the project, confounds the common tongue, and scatters its interlocutors across all corners of the earth (The Bible App, 2018). The story begins in a world with the potential of cultural homogeneity with people speaking a single tongue and sharing the same knowledge system. However, God himself denies the possibility of uniformity and aspirations of godlike omniscience. This denial also means that the world is scattered within complex, multilingual, multicultural, and widely diverse ways of knowing. Jacque Derrida (2007) argues that a universality of knowledge or even an attempted construction of a universal knowledge system becomes impossible due to extant forms of untranslatability:

> The "tower of Babel" does not merely figure the irreducible multiplicity of tongues; it exhibits an incompletion, the impossibility of finishing, of totalizing, of saturating, of completing something on the order of edification, architectural construction, system, and architectonics. What the multiplicity of idioms comes to limit is not only a "true" translation, a transparent and adequate interexpression, it is also a structural order, a coherence of construct. There is then (let us translate) something like an internal limit to formalization, an incompleteness of the constructure. (p. 192)

Derrida later continues, stating that given the state of a multilingual world, "Translation then becomes necessary and impossible, like the effect of a struggle for the appropriation of the name, necessary and forbidden in the interval between two absolutely proper names" (p. 196). The God Librarian is dead and yet she exists. Given Derrida's analysis, we find that she is at the intersection of necessity and impossibility. There is not a human alive that can speak all the world's languages or that can translate from one knowledge system (or language) to another without transgression or moreover violence (Bielsa, 2005, p. 142). A universal system of knowledge then cannot exist while it originates from a singular language and culture. Furthermore, if the diversity of human knowledges are more than the combinatorics of its inscribed orthography (i.e., language), then we have an ethical responsibility to venture beyond it.

Beyond Language

Borges' Library of Babel is not infinite inasmuch as written language is a closed system bounded by its structure. Even though language—specifically in its written form—is vast, there is a limit to its combinatorial possibilities. This is what Borges (1998) describes as "a general theory of the Library":

> . . . *There are twenty-five orthographic symbols.* That discovery enabled mankind, three hundred years ago, to formulate a general theory of the Library and thereby satisfactorily solve the riddle that no conjecture had been able to divine—the formless and chaotic nature of virtually all books. (p. 113, emphasis in the original)

Borges (2007) accounts for only twenty-five orthographic symbols because according to his prequel essay "The Total Library," he rejects and omits what he thinks are "completely superfluous" elements of orthography (p. 215). The combinatorics are only modified by the number of its elements, but the "general theory of the Library" still holds its assertion that language is bounded by its orthography (or sign system) and grammar. This boundedness is critical because if a library system aspiring to possess and catalog "all the world's knowledge" cannot

in principle encode within its sign system all forms of knowledge, then the project fails.

The limits of language do not equate to the limits of knowledge. There are forms of tacit knowledge in performance that escape written and spoken form and which are simply performed. These extralinguistic forms of knowledges have great difficulty becoming encoded into language and inscribed into a system of knowledge, particularly one that is foreign to the knower. For example, in "The One Thousand and One Nights," Borges (1984) tries to vocalize the concept of the "known unknowns," which is to say a tacit knowledge of time evading explication just beyond language:

> We will examine later the words Orient and Occident, East and West, which we cannot define, but which are true. They remind me of what St. Augustine said about time: "What is time? If you don't ask me, I know; but if you ask me, I don't know." (p. 36)

Another example within the same work includes the following:

> I have felt the presence of the East, and I don't know if I can define it; perhaps it's not worth it to define something we feel instinctively. (p. 40)

How is the librarian to store such embodied and tacit knowledge? There exist several problems. First, the librarian may not become aware of this phenomenon, even if it is she who is experiencing it. Secondly, how are tacit phenomena to be translated so that they can be encoded into a universal system in a form others can understand? Third, what happens when you bring something into a "universal language" of classification? Fourth, what sort of violence is inherent in the translation? Finally, what is there to be lost or gained in the process of translation?

Before approaching an ethical theory of translation of knowledges and applying it to a classification codex, one must deprivilege language conceding that it is but one of many forms of knowing. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1992) urges us to expand our horizons and focus on the fringes of language prior to curiously wondering and exploring beyond them:

> Language is not everything. It is only a vital clue to where the self loses its boundaries. The ways in which rhetoric or figuration disrupt logic themselves point at the possibility of random contingency, beside language, around language . . . The simple possibility that something might not be meaningful is contained by the rhetorical system as the always possible menace of a space outside language. This is most eerily staged (and challenged) in the effort to communicate with other possible intelligent beings in space. (Absolute alterity or otherness is thus differed-deferred into an other self who resembles us, however minimally, and with whom we can communicate.) But a more homely staging of it occurs across two earthly

> languages. The experience of contained alterity in an unknown language spoken in a different cultural milieu is uncanny. (Spivak, 1992, pp. 398–399)

Spivak discusses how we may have closed ourselves off from a possibility of meaning-making by the centering of language and its structures. She entices us to venture beyond language assuring us that although uncanny, other forms of knowledge have been previously performed. For example, there is meaning generated in the back-and-forth motion between two humans not using language to communicate but only the sensuous materialities of their bodies interacting; like the rattle of a baby held by her loving mother who reacts to her smile beyond words or preceding them. When we privilege language not only do we make alternative forms invisible, but over time we can lose the ability to sense them altogether. We narrow our existence into a closed system of language/knowledge and become echoes of what has already been uttered, or as Borges (1998) puts it "to speak is to commit tautologies" (p. 117). The most we can hope within this tautological system is repetition with a minute and often unremarkable change.

Theories of Translation

There is a foreign boy trying to open a jar by twisting it without any success. Another boy comes by and opens the jar for him by pulling because that is how most things are opened in that land. There does not exist a universal affordance to use or open objects but rather a cultural one, that is knowledge acquired by doing over time (Gibson, 1977). In other words, you must know the inside joke to arouse laughter or know the tacit structures (by embodying them) in order to know how to open a jar. There are extralinguistic structures that are influenced by language but not necessarily used by them to create consciousness. The body is both conditioned (instinctually) and socialized (culturally) to survive and live within a specific space and place (culture). Foreign beings—which is to say foreign to a dominant culture—begin a journey of translation both linguistic and extralinguistic in order to cope, learn, and survive in a space constituting differentiated environments. The foreign boy in the parable above needs to learn how to open jars (cultural affordances), how to move through space, and how to interact with and without personal space (a translation of space and performance). This begins to beckon for a theory of translation beyond language, which is to say the unbounded knowledge realms that express themselves through performance.

In demonstrating how linguistics structures between the Hopi and Standard Average European (SAE) languages form thoughts (and reality) for Hopi and SAE speakers in connection to their performance, Benjamin Lee Whorf (Carroll, 1956) succeeded in implicitly transforming the conceptualization of language from a static-timeless phenomenon to a performative one inhabiting space and time

(Carroll, 1956). His seminal work that led to the famous Sapir-Whorf hypothesis supports the notion that language (as well as knowledge) is performed. If language is performed, it must in its practice create mental structures that have a temporal dimension. These residuals, or traces of performance, become a part of our consciousness that can function in filtering (cognitively) and performative (conditioning) ways. They affect our rational (cognitive) and irrational (sensuous/instinctive) minds. Language is not a totality that can account for the complexity of our mind and the production of its function in our bodies. We live and move through space with both linguistic and extralinguistic formation. If we are to communicate intersubjectively, especially with those most "foreign" to us, we must be aware of this dynamic. We should not continue to force ourselves upon the "foreign" mind with only words—whether they are "irrational" or simply theorizing in an entirely different language—even if the words are translatable. Translation is never enough because our consciousness is formed by structures forged by years of lived/performed experience that may be untranslatable to the "foreign" mind. Within this same breadth, we must realize that the "foreign" mind may be untranslatable to our mind. In short, words alone may never be enough.

Language, as we know and use it today confers primacy onto lexicon, which becomes problematic. Other cultures that may not give language such a superlative status may be more attuned to these extralinguistic phenomena. In so doing, it may in fact facilitate communication and a mental translation of complex concepts such as love, enlightenment, peace, ethics of care, equity, justice, and the unknown. Formal language, as a closed system, attempts to inscribe a fixity to our everchanging, experiential existence. This can be evinced by turning an organic form of communication that is learned through socialization into a codified system of rules, decorum, and law among other forms of finitude. These forms of finitude do not reflect the complex movement and fluidity of living organisms and the complex, heterogeneous, networks they inhabit. What would a balance between language and extralinguistic forms of knowing look like? There is not a universal answer but rather a specific one found in the locality of its practice. The communicative powers of extralinguistic activities that (re)create knowledge are negotiated in the interaction and inhabitance of mutual space, especially personal space. A form of translation must be allowed to occur by limiting the use of language that may only serve to confound the meaning being generated co-creatively. The result of this practice would seem to be a more ethical bottom-up approach than a universal ontology forcing itself upon the multiplicity of different ways of knowing.

Orhan Pamuk (2014) proposes an approach to museums through a manifesto, but unlike the cold, unempathetic, impersonal, enunciation of institutions codifying knowledge from the top down, he begins by sharing his love and in so doing his personal space to engage a way up:

> I love museums and I am not alone in finding that they make me happier with each passing day. . . . In my childhood there were very few museums in Istanbul. Most of these were historical monuments or, quite rare outside the West-ern world, they were places with an air of a government office about them. Later, the small museums in the backstreets of European cities led me to realize that museums—just like novels—can also speak for individuals…. Museums should explore and uncover the universe and humanity of the new and modern man emerging from increasingly wealthy non-Western nations . . . (Pamuk, 2014)

Pamuk shares with us the intimacy of his love, happiness, childhood, and cultural origin in Istanbul. He invites us into his personal space where he implicitly requests a negotiation of understanding through empathy. In his text, the literal becomes inessential and what is written between the lines—which evokes empathy—becomes most essential (or meaningful) to the fearless reader (Benjamin, 2000, p. 15). With this engagement in his preamble, one can begin to connect and empathetically read through Pamuk's list of declarations. The list is less of a demand and more of a request to all those that can empathize with him. Pamuk's list alone would lack the extralinguistic evocation that was encoded in the literal. These are the fringes of language that are often overlooked in favor of efficiency and a sense of safety. What is demanded within Pamuk's list embodies similar notions of love, respect, self-determination, and epistemic pluralism. Specifically, Pamuk taps into the plurality of knowledges, especially its extralinguistic forms:

> 4. Demonstrating the wealth of Chinese, Indian, Mexican, Iranian, or Turkish history and culture is not an issue—it must be done, of course, but it is not difficult to do. The real challenge is to use museums to tell, with the same brilliance, depth, and power, the stories of the individual human beings living in these countries.

The methodology needed to "tell" the story of the lived experiences of the *Chilango* in Mexico City, or the Bengali in Kolkata requires a recreation of phenomenological aspects often lost in translation because they elude linguistic encodings. Classifying such knowledges becomes a task not only in need of a bottom-up approach but a re-theorization of knowledge itself. The Librarian by necessity becomes a theorist of knowledge and translation.

If we were to theorize about each knowledge item that we want to classify as a way of knowing with its own autochthonous language, then the approach to knowledge organization would necessitate a critical theory of translation as well. Translation can occur within knowledges of the same language, as in intralingual translation. Translation can even occur prior to enunciation as in reading, which is a form of translation going from text (language) to thought and subsequent interpretation. Spivak (2000) supports this notion positing that "language may be one of many elements that allow us to make sense of things, of ourselves" (p. 397), which includes reading text as a form of meaning making. The utterance of

language is its reverse form going from mind to speech as Octavio Paz (1971) writes describing human language acquisition:

> When we learn to speak, we are learning to translate; the child who asks his mother the meaning of a word is really asking her to translate the unfamiliar term into the simple words he already knows.

Paz simplifies translation into its most basic forms: a translation from thought to language. A politics of translation already exists here, at an infant stage. Spivak (2003) summarizes Melanie Klein's work which takes this further by adumbrating an elementary form of translation between an infant's interiority and exteriority:

> The human infant grabs on to some one thing and then things. This grabbing (*begreifen* as in *das Begriff* or concept) of an outside indistinguishable from an inside constitutes an inside, going back and forth and coding everything into a sign-system by the thing(s) grasped. One can call this crude coding a "translation." In this never-ending shuttle, violence translates into conscience and vice versa. (p. 14)

What Spivak is identifying is a form of interpretation and the development of "a sign system" (a language) through action. Grasping objects as a process of distinguishing exteriority and interiority is an approximation "to the irreducible work of translation, not from language to language but from body to ethical semiosis . . ." (p. 14). What is also implied here is that formal language seems to develop as a byproduct of action (i.e., the shuttling violence). Classifying and cataloging begin in infancy.

The violence perpetrated by the infant is inevitable because it constitutes life as a human being. The exploration through an infant's act of "grabbing" is part of human development that leads to a formation of identity and representation. Identity begins to be formed by a surfacing of a difference between interiority and exteriority which is to say the *one* (the self) and the *other* (outside objects and bodies). Furthermore, representation of the one can be distinguished from representations of the other, and a translation is needed to shuttle objects, text, and knowledge between them. Once this process is exercised long enough it can be moderated and translation becomes a political decision as opposed to the inevitable one performed by infants. Spivak identifies this type of process as a part of the human cycle into adulthood and ending only in death. What begins as a "natural" (instinctual) action continues into a cultural one where the site of violence is "deprivation," which is to say what cannot be wholly shuttled into the interiority must be severed from its context. In other words, violence is inherent in degrees of reterritorialization of text in the process of translation. To translate is to apprehend a text, interpret it within the political sphere of the translator, and recreate it in their mind in an effort to represent it. This constitutes the process of classification.

Finally, Spivak suggests that a more just translation can only happen through a type of critical hermeneutics made possible by a deep, familial understanding of the languages involved. What does this mean for the localist classification of knowledge? What does this mean for (political) representation, particularly encoded in the library? A sound ethical solution may rely not only on becoming cognizant of the violence of translation but also by ensuring that its shuttling process is negotiated in situ through a degree of love and intimacy. Spivak (2000) further provides us with the essence of what the process may look like:

> The task of the translator is to facilitate this love between the original and its shadow, a love that permits fraying, holds the agency of the translator and the demands of her imagined or actual audience at bay. (p. 398)

The librarian as translator of language, knowledge, and extralinguistic forms is better equipped to accomplish her task on site. Furthermore, if language indeed changes us, the translation is not only of language but one of translating the self.

Conclusion

A theory of translation is sorely needed as part of the process of knowledge organization, particularly one capable of the transcendence of language in acceptance that there are diverse ways of knowing. This is essay is not that theory. However, theories of translation deriving from the humanities—which is to say translation studies proper—may open new possibilities to construct more equitable and just systems of classification. Such theories urge us to move beyond the "classical view of language" that argues for an objective Truth that is approximated (if not revealed) through language, meaning that it is possible to find the perfect words and signs to convey pure mental content (Kristal, 2014, p. 30). From this view, the problem with translation lies with the words and signs used in translation and not with interpretation, embodiment, performance, bias, or cultural evocation. This view of language in popular culture perpetuates the classical view, which is to say a belief that language is fixed and is indexical to a universal truth constituting reality. Language is embodied and performed within the meaningful context of a specific culture. Although language changes the mental structure of the speaker, which affects thought and the construction of their reality, it is not the only way of knowing according to the authors discussed above. There does not exist a language that is superior to another. Each adapted to the pressures of their environment and its interlocutors' experiences. I do not deny that language is inextricable from culture and social practice, but it is only one site where meaning is generated and circulated (Agar, 1996).

The God Librarian and her universal classification system go against localized ways of knowing These local ways can reflect autochthonous knowledge

systems most accurately. These systems may not translate to fixed forms of Western classifications; hence, the God Librarian should not be an aspiration in practice. "The Library of Babel" on the other hand can and does exist, at least in digital form ("Library of Babel", 2018). In fact, this entire essay has already been written and can be found there. It is most unfortunate that I could not access it until I finished it.

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