

Understanding Wikipedia's dark matter: point of view and the role of translation in shaping it

Mark Shuttleworth

Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong, China

Translation can be thought of as Wikipedia's 'dark matter': we know it must be there but it is often difficult to locate. I use a number of approaches to track it down: identifying the rare cases where its presence is documented, comparing extracts from different parallel articles, digging back into the articles' history to discover the origin of translated text fragments or, more recently, utilizing an alignment tool that is being developed as part of an on-going project.¹ Previous research has shown that some news articles in the encyclopaedia resemble collages assembled from small text fragments some of which have been imported from another related article – very likely via a reference to an external news source included in that article.

Identifying the translated material, establishing what it is a translation of and tracking the fate of each translated fragment once inserted in an article are time-consuming tasks requiring detailed, painstaking work but are also necessary stages in the research. What is of interest is whether these fragments support an article's point of view and whether the knowledge that each supposedly parallel article contains is therefore in some way distinctive, providing its readers with a somewhat different presentation and interpretation of events. These are important considerations, not least in the light of Wikipedia's policy of pursuing a neutral point of view as a link does appear to exist between translation and point of view construction.

In my presentation I will aim to illustrate these issues via a number of examples that focus on how key points from articles covering one or more Russian news stories are reflected in the Chinese edition of Wikipedia. I believe research into Wikipedia translation will increase our understanding of the dynamics that govern the multilingual encyclopaedia and will provide translation studies with valuable case studies on a special type of partially collaborative translation. Wikipedia translation is in many ways unique but captures the essence of a style of communication that is becoming increasingly prevalent and for that reason is worthy of study.

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