**Fast forward to the past?**

Popular-song-translation communities as arenas for language acquisition and learning

Abstract:

This paper takes as its point of departure previous decades’ marginalization of translation as a component in formal language teaching and learning, looking at various ways in which information technology provides the means for a grass-roots reclaiming of translation as a tool in the acquisition and learning of languages. In the absence of policy-driven measures to reinstate translation as a theoretically-justified element of formal classroom activity, learners have arguably taken matters into their own hands, joining translation communities on the Internet where the activities performed, although complexly motivated, are also undertaken with the purpose of learning, and helping others learn, languages. The case used to illustrate this point is that of popular song translation. The motivations that fuel this kind of activity on the Internet are identified by analysing statements made on the communities’ web pages, and the potential of these communities as language acquisition and learning arenas is studied by analysing the different functionalities available to community members, functionalities which provide different forms of reward and enable interaction and *peer learning*.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Key words: Translation, Internet communities, song translation, non-professional translation, peer learning, language learning

**Introduction**

Up until the late 19th century, the grammar-translation method, a method combining rote learning of grammar rules with the translation of sentences invented to illustrate the rules, constituted the prevalent language teaching method. Since then, the idea that second languages should be learnt in the same way as first languages are (presumably) learned, by pure immersion in one language, has gradually displaced translation – a bi- or multilingual activity – from foreign and second language classrooms.[[2]](#endnote-2) Despite this, translation has continued to be used although it has yet to be “reinstated as a theoretically-justified activity in language teaching.”[[3]](#endnote-3) An interesting study by Karimian and Talebinejad[[4]](#endnote-4) illustrates well, however, how translation, in some form or other, may in fact somehow be inevitable when it comes to language *learning*. Their study showed a group of Iranian EFL learners at different levels of English-language proficiency reporting using a number of translation strategies for language learning such as mentally translating one language into another, using bilingual dictionaries, outlining ideas in their mother tongue before writing, and discussing, in their mother tongue, Persian, differences between Persian and English.[[5]](#endnote-5) It has also been suggested that translation, whether formal or informal, simply tends to be popular among students: unlike teaching methods that require students to speak out loud in a language they do not know well, it does not entail the risk of openly losing face; the activity caters to any introversion in students’ personalities,[[6]](#endnote-6) and it has tangible and immediate rewards in the form of correct or acceptable results.[[7]](#endnote-7) These positive aspects might partly explain why “[g]rammar-translation[[8]](#endnote-8) is […] widely used in books for self-study,”[[9]](#endnote-9) a tendency that has recently been extended to free, self-help language-learning platforms on the Internet such as Duolingo[[10]](#endnote-10) and Babbel,[[11]](#endnote-11) which use translation extensively.

Language learning platforms such as Duolingo and Babbel form a bridge between, on the one hand, formal language teaching and learning in classrooms, and on the other, self-initiated, non-professional translation activity on the Internet. This non-professional translation activity centres around different communities, which people join for a number of different reasons, but where language acquisition and learning are sometimes explicitly advertised advantages of participating, as well as – judging from members’ comments – an actively sought benefit of taking part. In this paper, I put forth some explorative notions regarding how such communities are perceived as language acquisition and learning arenas by members themselves, and regarding their potential as such arenas. Their *actual* ability to provide an increase in members’ language proficiency is not tested here; however, I do wish to argue that two factors at least increase the likelihood that some degree of language acquisition and learning takes place: firstly, the eager and willing engagement in meaningful language-producing and language-consuming activities, and secondly, the fact that the communities’ websites generally contain features that encourage interaction and thus enable *peer learning*, a form of learning which works by sharing knowledge, ideas and experience between – broadly speaking – equals.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Below I give some general background regarding various forms of translation and translation communities on the Internet and the reasons people give for joining them. I continue by offering some more specific insight into one, particular form of translation activity, namely popular song translation, which has given rise to a number of communities with slightly different functions and purposes. Members of these communities tend to be extremely active – at the moment of writing, one of the largest sites, lyricstranslate.com (Lyrics Translate), boasts over 400 000 translations (with nearly 30 000 pending requests for translations). This means that a large number of people are engaging with languages on a pretty large scale, which makes it worth exploring how song-translation communities could be seen as providing opportunities for language acquisition and learning. Looking at a concrete example of a translation from Lyrics Translate, and at an exchange between two community members which eventually led to a revision of the original translation, I try to demonstrate in some detail the nature of the peer learning – culturally speaking, translationally speaking and linguistically speaking – that may be said to be going on on this website.

**Forms of ‘amateur’/non-professional/volunteer/community/unpaid translation on the Internet**

Most lay and scientific meta-reflection around translation and translators concerns professional[[13]](#endnote-13) translators producing professional, published translations. But, translation is very much – as it has always been – an everyday, informal activity that many of us engage in. Individuals with some degree of linguistic skill have always tended to be given the task of translating for others, more or less impromptu, orally or in writing, at home or at work, although it could be argued that this role is being taken over, in this day and age, by automated translation services. The advent of information technology has created even more arenas for informal translational activity, variously labelled amateur/non-professional/volunteer/community/unpaid translation. In fact, there is now a veritable jungle of phenomena involving these kinds of translation on the Internet, a jungle that needs some disentangling in order to contextualize the phenomena at hand and make their nature and significance clear.

*Crowdsourcing*

An initial, rough division line can be drawn between translation that is a response to a call by a profit or non-profit organization to perform a translation for them for free, and that which involves self-election to join a group or community. The former is known as crowdsourcing, a term traceable, it is generally assumed, back to contributing editor of Wired magazine[[14]](#endnote-14) Jeff Howe.[[15]](#endnote-15) In Howe’s blog dedicated to the topic, he characterizes crowdsourcing as “the act of a company or institution taking a function once performed by employees and outsourcing it to an undefined (and generally large) network of people in the form of an open call.”[[16]](#endnote-16) Two major examples of crowdsourcing within translation are constituted by Facebook and Google, who have directed calls for help with translating their use-interfaces broadly at a general group of their own users (hence the terms user-generated translation,[[17]](#endnote-17) and user-generated content[[18]](#endnote-18)). As regards the question of such companies’ motivations for issuing such calls, the answer is relatively obvious. According to Anastasiou and Gupta,[[19]](#endnote-19) crowdsourcing yields quick results, it is cheap, and compared to machine translation, the output is good. Commenting on the potential benefit for the “crowds”, Anastasiou and Gupta highlight, among other things that ”the community gains from crowdsourcing in that it can use the technology in its own mother tongue, and thus its voice can be easily heard – which is particularly important for minor languages.”[[20]](#endnote-20) Beyond that, motivations are generally of the psychological kind, according to Anastasiou and Gupta: knowledge seeking, recognition and attention, emotional attachment to a given brand or community, and personal enjoyment.[[21]](#endnote-21) Respondents in a study conducted by Dolmaya into the motivations of crowd translators also reported ‘practicing my source/target languages’ as a reason for participating.[[22]](#endnote-22)

Crowdsourcing is also a key aspect of the functioning of non-profit, humanitarian organizations such as The Rosetta Foundation, which specializes in making important information on basic education and health issues accessible to individuals around the world.[[23]](#endnote-23) According to Michael Cronin, the current technological development means that “the politicisation of translation through collective volunteer action is present and growing.”[[24]](#endnote-24) Participants here contribute out of a sense of social responsibility and solidarity, motivations that possibly overshadow other potential reasons to join.

All crowdsourcing initiatives depend at least in part on a sense of community actively nurtured by the initiators, to no small degree by means of enabling and encouraging a collaborative translation process: often, translators translate small amounts of text each, anything from a sentence up to whole text with several hundreds, if not thousands of words, and often there are complex feedback, rating and reward systems, which are there to ensure motivation as well as output quality.[[25]](#endnote-25)

*Non-crowdsourcing communities*

A sense of community is also an important motivational force when non-professional translators, rather than being crowdsourced, self-elect to undertake translations of various kinds of text. Probably the most thoroughly studied of all types of non-crowdsourced translation on the Internet is fan translation. The basic driving force in fan translation (including fansubbing[[26]](#endnote-26) and fandubbing[[27]](#endnote-27)) is the desire to engage with a cherished work of literature, a genre, a series, a film, or a game, and the joy of sharing the translated text with other fans. By exploiting their networks to collaborate on a translation, fans can produce a translation in hardly any time and publish it segment by segment on the Net to satisfy eager, non-Anglophone readers.[[28]](#endnote-28) As far as audio-visual fan translation is concerned, the earliest, and most thoroughly studied case is fansubbing of Japanese anime. What fansubbers get out of it and what prompts them to continue, states Lee, who interviewed nine fansubbers of anime into English, is a “sense of pleasure, fun and reward.” In addition, “[f]orming and taking part in the community is […] an important motivation”: working on a task together inspires a sense of friendship and enjoyment in working together with others.[[29]](#endnote-29) Furthermore, learning and enhancing their knowledge of anime and learning “new skills, such as translation and editing skills” is something the fansubbers enjoy and express pride in.[[30]](#endnote-30) Last but not least, according to Zhang, a “majority of fansubbers [in China] believe that translating subtitles is an effective way of learning a foreign language and having a better understanding of culture, which has been a key motivation for them to take part in fansubbing tasks.”[[31]](#endnote-31) Susam-Saraeva, studying popular song translation in the context of Greek-Turkish relations, also found this to be an important motivation for those engaging in *song* translation on the Internet: “there are those fans who actually participate in the lyrics and translation exchange due to their desire to learn a new language or improve their skills in one of their foreign languages.”[[32]](#endnote-32)

**Song translation on the Internet**

A considerable amount of the fan translation that goes on on the Internet comes in the form of popular-song-lyric translation focusing on specific genres, bands or artists. On the other hand, not all of the song lyric translation that goes on there *is* easily classifiable as fan translation; this kind of activity can be found on sites that are *not* focused on specific genres, bands or artists. Here, language learning often figures as an explicit reason for engaging in the translation activity.

*Song translation as fan translation*

The prime example in this category is the heavy metal genre, which has always been home to a lively fan translation activity. Because of the typically growly singing style impeding clear enunciation, loud backing music, opaque and intricate lyrics with deep ideological and emotional significance for audiences and their communities, and last but not least, a tendency to reach back to history and myth by using (sometimes ancient versions of) one’s mother tongue, translations of lyrics have been a vital part of metal fandom for a longer time than most other genres.[[33]](#endnote-33) Translated lyrics can often be found on a band’s official site, and/or the translation activity is carried out on a separate site dedicated to translating the songs of that band. The translation activity surrounding the Japanese kawaii metal (cute metal) group Babymetal[[34]](#endnote-34) illustrates both: one of the main menu labels on the band’s official site is entitled ‘translation’, and contains translations into English of a handful of their songs. Several of the translations are, however, credited to the blog Babymetal translations unofficial,[[35]](#endnote-35) which is run by Enki-Du (pseudonym), a Japanese speaker who translates Babymetal songs and interviews with the group.

The basic purpose of fan song lyric translation seems to be to make the content of the lyrics accessible to fans who do not understand the original language.[[36]](#endnote-36) This tends to be reflected in the chosen translation strategy, which is most often that of *non-singable translation*,[[37]](#endnote-37) translation that does not take rhythmical and other properties pertaining to singability or ease of singing into account. The Babymetal translations by Enki-Du are however one among a few exceptions, insofar as the translator at least *aims* at singability: “I try to find such a phrase,” states the blogger, “that the syllable with accent comes on the note with accent in the melody.”[[38]](#endnote-38)

The translations by Enki-Du are accompanied by extensive notes explaining culturally-specific items,[[39]](#endnote-39) a strategy that strongly resembles that used within anime subtitling, where the screen is often ‘littered’ with such information,[[40]](#endnote-40) explaining and justifying translational choices made. In a language acquisition and learning, such notes become important contributions in a debate about meanings and how they can, and cannot, be expressed in another language. Enki-Du receives a large amount of commentary where other fans express their gratitude for the translation, ask questions for clarification, offer praise and/or discuss alternatives. Enki-Du also takes part in negotiations over meanings in others’ translations: “when I find difficulty in translation, I explain what I want to express with that phrase […] I do so when I disagree with other translators (of BABYMETAL's songs or else) on the interpretation of these words.”[[41]](#endnote-41) In the course of such negotiations, all parties in involved – translators, commentators, as well as readers of translations and comments – are highly likely to get their cultural and linguistic horizons challenged and widened, whether the explicit goal is to ‘learn a language’ or not.

The same kind of negotiation can be found in another sub-type of fan song translation, namely amateur music video subtitling. Sometimes the music video in question consists of amateur footage of a live performance, other times, the video consists of stills put together to illustrate the mood of the song. The lyrics, translated into one or more languages, will be printed across the screen, with or without the original lyrics present. Here, YouTube comment fields function as an arena for negotiating cross-linguistic meanings. For British pop star Adele’s hit “Someone like You” subtitled into German, the comment field is flooded with contradictory statements such as “i like” and “Hast du sehr schön gemacht!” [Very nicely done] and “oh man..das ist sau schade das an manchen stellen die texte wegsind” [oh man, it is really a shame that the lyrics are missing in some places], and discussions erupt over the most ‘correct’ translation of a given item: “an sich ist ja “niedergelassen hast” die wortwörtliche übersetzung... und “sesshaft geworden bist” ist die freiere - und in dem Kontext - auch die bessere Übersetzung” [actually, it is “settled down” that is the literal translation… and “having become a resident” is the freer – and in this context – the better translation].[[42]](#endnote-42)

*Song translation for other purposes*

Song translation sites that do notpresent themselves as, or come clearly across as, fan translation sites may sport other more or less overt purposes, including, according to Fernández Costales, “[t]ranslating to preserve cultural heritage;”[[43]](#endnote-43) building and taking part in a community (centred less on fandom than on knowledge and skills development); learning how to translate; and language learning. The first on the list is motivation based on a “cultural scenario: the dissemination of contents into different languages can pursue social and cultural aims, as it makes it possible to improve the visibility of peripheral groups or minorities which are not sufficiently represented in the mainstream panorama.”[[44]](#endnote-44) Sites that revolve around song translation or song translations within this cultural scenario often home in on a specific genre and/or a specific cultural area or language. There exists, for example, a site that specializes in the translation of the lyrics of tango music into a number of different languages.[[45]](#endnote-45) Anyone can add a translation, but she or he has to be accepted as an administrator of the site in order to be allowed to edit one. At the moment of writing, the site tangotranslation.com has 1283 translations available. Most of them are into English, but there are also a sizeable number of translations into French, Russian, Italian and German.[[46]](#endnote-46) Another example is found in the Facebook community *Turkish Songs Translation*, where we find, in addition to the cultural aim of promoting one’s own language and literature, explicit reference to the language learning potential of translation(s): “Turkish music & Poems are beautiful, lovely, meaningful and valuable and worthy to be translated so that anyone be able to understand […] Please relax and enjoy listening to these beautiful songs while you may learn some words in turkish [sic] too”.[[47]](#endnote-47) Such sites[[48]](#endnote-48) are typically less interactive; the user of the site is meant to study the original and the translated version in order to learn about the culture and/or the language.[[49]](#endnote-49)

Other sites place more emphasis on community, translation practice, and language learning, *not* through studying already existing translations, but through translating and receiving feedback on one’s translations. The top site (on Google) of all song translation sites is Lyrics Translate,[[50]](#endnote-50) which is also the key example of such a site. It is not a typical fan translation site since the focus is not on a particular group or artist, however, there *is* an element of fandom as many of the artists whose songs are represented are artists with a massive following, such as Adele, and Justin Bieber.

On the site’s introductory page there are several proclamations regarding what the community can offer its members. In some of them, the interactive, community-building elements of the site are emphasized: “Communicate: Talk in forums, look for friends, and help with translations.”[[51]](#endnote-51) Essential elements in building a community are mentioned: communication, friendship, assisting others. This echoes Fernández Costales’ “[t]ranslating to help other people.”[[52]](#endnote-52) At the time of writing, 25, 202 requests for song translations and transcriptions, to and from every conceivable language (including extinct and constructed languages) are in line for a translator, any translator, to volunteer to do them. The altruistic element is reiterated in another proclamation, where, however, it is rendered somewhat less altruistic by pointing to the immediate rewards awaiting those who take on translation tasks: “Translate: Become a translator, help others, get respect and gratitude.” Firstly, instead of a pecuniary reward, you gain, according to this site’s authors, status by earning yourself a title, that of ‘translator’. The second type of reward mentioned is that which in ideal cases follows from most forms of ‘helping others’, viz. respect and gratitude. On the Lyrics Translate site, there is a five-star rating system and a ‘Thanks!’ button, both of which make respect and gratitude very tangible commodities. Other built-in gratification consists in a system where points are awarded by the site’s administrators for each translation, transliteration, video, etc., added to the site by a member. The more points, the higher your member rank. Finally, badges are awarded for best translation, best voter, best video editor, and so on.[[53]](#endnote-53)

A further proclamation revolves around the notion of self-improvement.[[54]](#endnote-54) By engaging in song translation, you acquire cultural and linguistic knowledge: “[c]omment on translations of other users and receive feedback on your translations – this will improve your knowledge and help others to improve.”[[55]](#endnote-55) The site strongly presents itself as offering an educational opportunity: “You'll enjoy yourself while helping others, communicating, and educating yourself. ‘Cause songs and song meanings carry the essence of every culture.”[[56]](#endnote-56) The language learning aspect is also highlighted, firstly, by the placement of a seemingly permanent ad for the translation-based language learning tool Babbel at the front page,[[57]](#endnote-57) and further by the slogan cited on the so-called Forums page: “Speaking and learning languages using lyrics translation”.[[58]](#endnote-58) In the Languages and Translation Forum members discuss language-specific issues, and in another section of the site there is an Idioms page[[59]](#endnote-59) where translators can post idiomatic expressions in any language, offering their own translations, or requesting translations of the expression into any language. The result is an impressive multilingual dictionary of various types of fixed expressions. For example, for the English proverb ‘Blood is thicker than water’, we get versions in Vietnamese, Turkish, Spanish, Serbian, Russian, Romanian, Polish, Korean, Japanese, Italian, Greek, German, Dutch, Danish, and Bulgarian.[[60]](#endnote-60) For many of the languages, there are also additional definitions and explanations in the target (or other) language(s).

**Lyrics Translate as an arena for language acquisition and learning**

The above outline of how such sites present themselves to members and what features they possess has shown that there exist a multitude of different projected and adopted reasons for entering and engaging with a given community – language learning being one among them. In the following, I isolate this particular aspect, discussing the potential of such communities to fulfil their sites’ promises and their members’ expectations on this particular count. And in doing so, I focus on two points in particular, firstly, the role of *motivation* in language learning and how such sites can provide motivation for engaging in activities that expose members to their second or foreign language(s), reflect on the relationship between their own and their second/foreign language(s) and/or require them to produce texts in their second/foreign language. Secondly, I focus on the interactional nature of these communities. It is well established that interaction with other language producers and/or learners is conducive to acquisition and learning. Hence, I look, in the following, at aspects of Lyrics Translate that provide motivation for engaging with others’ cultures, cultural meanings and languages, and features that enable interaction. In regard to the latter, I discuss the possible suitability of the concept of *peer learning* to an analysis of what goes on on such sites.

In their article ‘The internal structure of language learning motivation’, Csizér and Dörnyei sum up seven factors that have been found to influence learners’ motivation to learn foreign languages: integrativeness (desire to integrate into the L2 culture), attitudes towards the L2 speakers/community, vitality of the L2 community, instrumentality, cultural interest, linguistic self-confidence, and milieu.[[61]](#endnote-61) When it comes to translation communities on the Internet as arenas for language acquisition and learning, the last three of these factors, cultural interest, linguistic self-confidence, and milieu, seem to be of particular relevance. ‘Cultural interest’ pertains to the desire to learn a language for the possibility of appreciating “cultural products associated with the particular L2 and conveyed by the media (e.g., films, videos, TV programs, pop music, magazines, and books).”[[62]](#endnote-62) Interestingly, translation communities like Lyrics Translate, as fan translation sites, seem to work on some sort of opposite principle, viz. appreciating cultural products in order to learn about cultures and acquire languages. In other words, the cultural product provides motivation at the outset, not at the end of some process. What Csizér and Dörnyei are suggesting is perhaps more true for beginners, while sites like Lyrics Translate presuppose more advanced learners, who have already reached the stage where they can appreciate these products, but want to deepen their involvement with them, and as a means to that, as well as an end, their proficiency in their L2.

Csizér and Dörnyei point to linguistic self-confidence as an important motivational factor. General confidence can obviously be a great motivator; however confidence can also, as indicated earlier, be task-dependent. According to Sewell, “an activity such as written translation […] offers greater opportunity for the student to enjoy enhanced self-esteem than the communicative class which is constantly challenging his/her self-image.”[[63]](#endnote-63) Sewell’s statement concerns translation as a task in the foreign or second-language classroom. When it comes to song translation on the Net, an added confidence booster could be the fact that one can choose to remain anonymous vis-à-vis other members, thus never risking to lose one’s ‘real’ face, if negative comments should ensue. Two other possible aspects are first, the fact that many translators choose to translate into their mother tongues, which might conceivably provide a sense of control, and second, precisely the fact that the translated texts are songs: they are typically quite short; if translated non-singably, a draft can easily be produced in one sitting, and in addition, the language used in pop lyrics is often not exceedingly complicated.

Referring back to Clément,[[64]](#endnote-64) Csizér and Dörnyei point out that “the main antecedents of self-confidence are the quality and quantity of social contact.”[[65]](#endnote-65) It is difficult to judge the quality of the social contact provided by sites such as Lyrics Translate; when it comes to quantity, however, the site obviously presents ample opportunities for its members. They may request translations, get a response, post translations, get ‘thanked’ (get thank-you clicks), receive suggestions for improvement, acquire points, badges, and so on. Because of the safety of anonymity (if anonymity is chosen), even shy and introverted people can take part without experiencing anxiety.

The value of social contact furthermore ties in with the importance for motivation of what has been termed a ‘milieu’, which “has been used in L2 motivation research to refer to the social influences stemming from the immediate environment as opposed to the macrocontext […] and it is usually operationalized as the perceived influence of significant others, such as parents, family, and friends.”[[66]](#endnote-66) When it comes to web communities, it can sometimes be quite difficult to disentangle the ‘immediate environment’ (the milieu) from the ‘macro-context’. The definition of the term ‘friend’ has become considerably broadened in the Internet age, and many users will claim that it is quite possible to feel as close to a virtual friend as a flesh-and-blood friend. Therefore, the other people on the site may well form part of a perceived milieu for a translator or a receiver of a translations, meaning that the site becomes a place where motivation can develop and common attitudes towards language activities and language learning are formed. One essential difference, however, between a physical and a virtual milieu such as this, is that while the physical milieu exists independently of the activity under scrutiny, the virtual milieu does not, and is very much *constituted* by this activity. In the words of Susam-Saraeva, being able to understand the lyrics in the language of the Other with the help from other members, and “also being able to pronounce them, sing them and learning or trying to learn the Other’s language, all become *ways of belonging* to these virtual communities” (my italics).[[67]](#endnote-67)

The notion of ‘milieu’ ties in with that of *peer learning*.[[68]](#endnote-68) Boud defines peer learning as “a two-way, reciprocal learning activity. Peer learning should be mutually beneficial and involve the sharing of knowledge, ideas and experience between the participants. It can be described as a way of moving beyond independent to *interdependent* or mutual learning” (emphasis in original).[[69]](#endnote-69) Furthermore, “[t]he emphasis is on the learning process, including the emotional support that learners offer each other, as much as the learning task itself […] in peer learning […] [the roles of teacher and learner] are either undefined or may shift during the course of the learning experience.”[[70]](#endnote-70) ‘Peers’ in this context are, according to Boud:

other people in a similar situation to each other who do not have a role in that situation as teacher or expert practitioner. They may have considerable experience and expertise, or they may have relatively little. They share the status as fellow learners and they are accepted as such. Most importantly, they do not have power over each other by virtue of their position or responsibilities.[[71]](#endnote-71)

Parts of this definition fit what is going on within sites such as Lyrics Translate well, other parts do not fit quite as well. Regarding the fact that members’ motivations are, as shown, complex, the notion that peers ‘share the status as fellow [language] learners’ will of course for this kind of context only be part of the truth. They can, however, be seen as being ‘in a similar situation to each other’, insofar as they are all users of the site, which means that however different they may be in terms of gender, age, occupation and (main) motivation for participating on the site, they all share the common goal of participating and harvesting the benefits that such participation entails (i.e. it is not the case that some people are paid to provide some kind of service vis-à-vis the others). Furthermore, members may have ‘considerable experience and expertise, or they may have relatively little’, and typically – as is also likely the case in IRL peer learning – the level of experience and expertise will not be equally distributed across a given group. Some members will always be more experienced and have more expertise than others, i.e. peer learning does not – cannot – presuppose an equal level of proficiency in regards to the object of learning. This inequality, however, is duly recorded in sites like Lyrics Translate: members with experience and expertise tend to be have their status made visible for example in terms of labels such as Super Member and Junior Member (see below). While this status is likely to carry along with it a certain measure of informal power, it is not the case, however, that the members have *formal* ‘power over each other by virtue of their positions or responsibilities’. Thus, we may still talk about ‘peers’, although a members’ status may influence who typically takes on the role of teacher vs. pupil within a given exchange.

The following examples provide an idea of how such sites provide opportunities for interdependent and mutual language learning. Firstly, many interactions are simple, consisting of one or a few corrections in cases where the translator’s choice of equivalent demonstrates an insufficient grasp of the source language, plus, usually, an acknowledgement of the correction by the translator:

Beast-senior 810: Hi, let me allow just one correction: yogore -> kegare (in ~ o kiyomeru

akai tsuki)

Amok Vogel: Thank you ^^[[72]](#endnote-72)

The member offering the correction, Beast-senior 810, is a so-called Super Member, meaning that she has an impressive track record involving translation and other kinds of activity on the site (her member profile lists “823 translations, thanked 413 times, solved 106 requests, helped 62 members, transcribed 15 songs, added 76 idioms, explained 55 idioms”[[73]](#endnote-73)). The person receiving the help is Amok Vogel, who, although lower than Beast-senior 810, is also quite high up in the hierarchy being a Senior Member with “94 translations, thanked 32 times, solved 32 requests, helped 16 members, transcribed 1 song.”[[74]](#endnote-74) Quite often, however, the member offering the correction is lower down in the hierarchy than the person receiving it:

marta90: Thank you so much [for the translation]! Old songs are so charming.

Danke 

Two small mistakes:

1) “And tells you all the time that it comes from ME” instead of EM

2) I think “But I want to HERE” should be “But I want to HEAR”

Steena: (no response)[[75]](#endnote-75)

Steena, who has so far not thanked marta90 for her help is a Moderator, that is, at the very top of the hierarchy (with a track record of 1759 translations to date) while marta90 is ‘merely’ a Super Member, with 236 translations. And in the following example, the person offering help in disentangling a particularly complex item in the source language is a mere Member, while the one receiving the help is a Senior Member:

Sante\_Caserio: “isbreteppets drakt”?

Sylvrosa: “Isbreteppets drakt”: To understand, divide into known words “isbre”,

“teppet” og “drakt”. Translate this to “glacier” “blanket” “clothing” to get an idea what it means.

The hard part is putting it together into something that makes sense without sounding awful. I would think “clothed in a blanket of ice” or “underneath the glacier blanket” would be my best ideas.[[76]](#endnote-76)

In sum, while there may be a tendency towards rank being a factor in determining who takes on the role of teacher and who of pupil, the likelihood that lower ranked members assume the role of teacher and vice versa is also quite high. Note, for example, how Sante Caserio, the Senior Member in the previous example, casts himself in the role of pupil when asking for help with the Norwegian expression “isbreteppets drakt”. Such examples indicate that while ranking within the system means status, this does not automatically entail authority in negotiations over meanings and linguistic norms. Other factors, such as native ability in a language, may cancel out the possible effects of such status, or it simply does not come with any real sense of power. In this way, ‘peer learning’ seems to remain a suitable theory for what goes on within such communities.

The description of peer learning as involving interdependency and mutuality is however something that warrants some explanation in light of examples like the above. Short exchanges like these seem to be the norm, and, although this *may* happen, there is no evidence to suggest that member A when helping member B should automatically expect a helpful visit back from member B. Instead, ‘mutuality’ has to be seen on a more global scale, where the offering and receiving of help criss-crosses the community sometimes in lines that do not always double back on themselves. As a translator, you are likely to get feedback from *someone or other*, but you are also likely to offer *your* help not to *this* particular member, but rather to a third (or fourth or fifth, and so on), depending on your (and their) particular linguistic background(s), and perhaps, on chance. Thus, in the context of sites like Lyrics Translate, the notion of mutuality might be fruitfully exchanged by one of, precisely, *community* (in the active sense of that word), since this *may* entail concrete mutual dyadic or triadic, etc. activity, but not necessarily so, and not necessarily in any simple pattern.

Longer and more complex exchanges between members typically involve negotiations of issues which one might want to label ‘cultural’ and ‘translational’ rather than narrowly ‘linguistic’. Since we tend to associate the former with other types of learning object than *language* as such, these may not seem to fall under the topic I am discussing here. I would, however, wish to claim that discussions of historical and cultural aspects of words and expressions are indeed an important aspect of language learning, and that discussions of such aspects among members may well be fuelled by an aspiration to understand better both the underlying culture and the linguistic items associated with it (in the same way that various forms of written exercises in formal teaching and learning are aimed at providing improved language proficiency). In the exchange quoted below, between Super Member Valeriu Raut (VR) and Junior Member luken, the former assumes the role of teacher, commenting on luken’s translation of a French/Basque bilingual lyric, entitled “Il est un coin de France,” translated (after a round of revisions) into English as “There’s a part of France” (see table 1).[[77]](#endnote-77)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Il est un coin de France Il est un coin de France  Où le bonheur fleurit  Où l’on connaît d’avance  Les joies du paradis    Et quand on a la chance  D'être de ce pays  On est comme en vacances  Durant toute sa vie    Refrain en Basque :          Airetun chikitun          Airetun laïré          Airetun chikitun          Airetun laïré          Airetun chikitun          Airetun laïré          Airetun chikitun laïré          Olé    Le jour de sa naissance  On est pelotari  Dès la première enfance  Le douanier vous poursuit    Quand vient l’adolescence  Les filles vous sourient  Et l’on chante et l’on danse  Même quand on vieillit :    {au Refrain}    Et la nuit dans nos montagnes  Nous chantons autour du feu  Et le vent qui vient d’Espagne  Porte au loin cet air joyeux :    {au Refrain}    La, la, la, la ...  Laïré… | There's a part of France (Revised lyric) There is a part of France  Where happiness flourishes  Where we already know  The joys of heaven    And when you’re fortunate enough  To be a native of this land  It’s like you’re on vacation  All your life    Refrain in Basque :  Airetun chikitun  Airetun laïré  Airetun chikitun  Airetun laïré  Airetun chikitun  Airetun laïré  Airetun chikitun laïré  Olé    The day of your birth  You're a pelota player  Even in childhood  The customs officer is on your back    With the onset of adolescence  Girls smile at you  And we sing and we dance  Even when we grow old    {Refrain}    And by night in our mountains  We sing around the fire  And the wind from Spain  Carries this happy melody far and wide:    {Refrain}    La, la, la, la ...  Laïré… |

Table 1

This is the exchange between VR and luken that ended up in the revised translation shown in table 1:

VR(1): Hello luken.  
It's a good translation, thanks.  
My suggestions:  
Il est un coin de France > There’s a corner of France  
Or: There’s a little part of France

Refrain (en) in Basque  
Le douanier > The customs officer  
And (in the) by night in our mountains

Kind regards

luken(2): Thanks Valeriu,

Oops! I forgot to translate “en Basque” altogether...  
“By night” is much easier on the ears, you are right, but “a corner of France” is a little too literal in my opinion.  
I am keeping douanier as border control though, because I assume the singer is referring to the undocumented traffic of the Basque people within their own “nation” that spans parts of Spain and France. France and Spain presumably try to control border traffic; in my understanding customs is more concerned with the taxation and flow of goods, as opposed to people.  
If you have more insight into the phenomenon that the singer is referring to here, please let me know! My knowledge of Basque culture is limited and I am always curious.

Cheers

VR(3): Years ago, near the border with Spain, poor people lived on smuggling: mainly cigarettes and alcohol.  
The same happened at the borders with Switzerland and Italy.  
So, in our song, it’s the customs officer.  
It was not easy to climb mountains with a heavy load on your back.  
And the income was scarce, and you were treated as a bandit.  
Nowadays people is not so poor.

I have a remote parent who crossed the border between France and Spain without having all legal documents.  
On the train, he was carefully checked by Spanish board control military - and they let him enter Spain.  
They looked only for ETA members.

Un coin de France - means a little place in France.  
A part of France - it sounds as a big part; it’s not in the spirit of our song.

luken(4): Thank you for the thoughtful reply! That’s a very interesting piece of Basque history and in that case customs officer is much more appropriate.

Roughly, three issues are at stake here. Firstly, VR points out a translation ‘error’ – at least both interactants agree that this is an error (the omission of *en Basque*, mentioned in comments 1 and 2); secondly, they negotiate translation norms via a concern on the micro-level with the translation of the phrase *un coin de France*: is the translation solution *a corner of France* too literal, and what is the precise meaning of *un coin* anyway*?* (Discussed in 1, 2 and 3). Finally, they discuss how a given item should be interpreted within its cultural and historical context (*douanier*, in 1, 2, 3, and 4). While the first of the three issues (omission), and part of the second (the issue of literalism in translation) could be said to belong more or less squarely in realm of translation issues, the negotiation of the meaning of *un coin*, and the discussion of *douanier* is something that I would certainly characterize as potentially contributing to deepening luken’s understanding of the source language items in question, and hence contributing to his language learning, even quite narrowly speaking. After the exchange, luken posts a revised version of the lyric, where he takes into account some, not all, of VR’s suggestions (the translation reproduced in table 1). The two interactants never quite agree on the best way to render *un coin*, with the result that luken leaves as it was originally translated, as *a part* (not changing it according to VR’s suggestion to *a corner*, or *a little part*). In other words, while luken’s discussion with VR has not led him to adopt a new understanding of the expression (in the given context), it has reinforced his original understanding, which is also an aspect of learning. As for *border control,* this is changed to *customs officer*, indicating that luken here accepts VRs offer of knowledge, incorporating it into his own knowledge repository.

**Concluding remarks**

In his article ‘Denial of translation and desire to translate’, Gambier comments on the high degree of Internet activity of non-professional photographers and journalists, stating that “[d]enied for so long, translation does not generate the same enthusiasm.”[[78]](#endnote-78) Although this may to a certain extent be true, to me, a catalogue of over 400 000 song translations found on Lyrics Translate attests to quite a significant degree of enthusiasm. In this paper, I have outlined a number of motivations for taking part in unpaid translation on the Internet, some postulated by other researchers, some expressed by users on the sites I have studied, and some deducible from the amount and type of activity that goes on in these sites. Some very important motivations for taking part in song translation on the Internet seem to be the desire to engage with a cherished idol, the wish to be part of a community, the attainment of visibility and status (in the form of stars, points, thanks, and badges), a wish to help others, getting translation practice, and learning about other cultures and languages. As regards Lyrics Translate as an arena for language acquisition and learning, it was pointed out that while engaging actively in the production and consumption of translations will naturally contribute to language acquisition, the site also contributes features that aid this acquisition and provides incentives to learn and means of learning. It was suggested that the focus of such sites on the cultural interest of members at the very least ‘leads them to the water’ of language learning, that they may be felt as safe arenas to display their (sometimes limited) linguistic skills, and that they provide milieus which foster an interest in and common attitudes to language learning. Furthermore, the interactional features of such sites were said to enable a form of peer learning, where ‘peers’ are not necessarily to be understood as a homogenous group in terms of status. Despite differences in site-assigned status, it was shown that members of any rank can cast themselves as or end up as ‘teacher’ or ‘pupil’, vis-à-vis members below them in status, or above them. The degree of concrete mutuality among members did not seem to be very high, although here, as with many aspects concerning such sites as arenas of language acquisition and learning, more research is needed.

I argued that many if not most cultural, translational and linguistic issues are intertwined, and showed that such issues are eagerly negotiated in exchanges where the participants seem to be able to develop independent stances as language learners, as well as gaining a deeper understanding of linguistic items through a better understanding of their cultural context. More research is needed before we can assess all the nuances of the potential of such sites but for now it would seem like a safe course of action to give hints to struggling and unmotivated language learners about their existence.

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3. Guy Cook, “Use of Translation in Language Teaching,” in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, eds. Mona Baker and Kirsten Malmkjær (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 118. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Zeinab Karimian and Mohammad Reza Talebinejad, “Students’ Use of Translation as a Learning Strategy in EFL Classroom,” *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, vol. 4, no. 3 (May 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Zeinab Karimian and Mohammad Reza Talebinejad, “Students’ Use of Translation as a Learning Strategy in EFL Classroom,” p. 607. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. These things can, of course, be said about any type of written activity, however, this does not make it less true for translation. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Penelope Sewell, “Students Buzz Round the Translation Class like Bees Round the Honey Pot – Why?” in *Translation in Undergraduate Degree Programmes*, ed. Kirsten Malmkjær (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. The method that dominated language teaching before (and for a while after) the advent of the direct method around 1900; combines rote learning of grammatical rules and translation of disconnected sentences. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Guy Cook, “Use of Translation in Language Teaching,” p. 118. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. <<https://www.duolingo.com/>> Website consulted May 20, 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. <<http://about.babbel.com/en/>> Website consulted May 20, 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Boud, Cohen and Sampson, eds. *Peer Learning in Higher Education: Learning From and With Each Other*. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. I adopt here Gambier’s definition of ’professional translators’: ”those who have been trained for, and/or have experience in, translation” (Yves Gambier, “Denial of Translation and Desire to Translate,” *Vertimo Studijos*, vol. 5 (2012), p. 17), while acknowledging that the boundary between professional and non-professional is, in practice, not always easy to draw. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. An American print and online magazine that reports on the interrelationship between emerging technologies, culture, economy and politics. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
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20. Dimitra Anastasiou and Rajat Gupta, “Comparison of Crowdsourcing Translation with Machine Translation,” p. 641. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Dimitra Anastasiou and Rajat Gupta, “Comparison of Crowdsourcing Translation with Machine Translation,” p. 641. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Julie McDonough Dolmaya, “Analyzing the Crowdsourcing Model and its Impact on Public Perceptions of Translation,” *The Translator*, vol. 18, no. 2 (2012), p. 182. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. See Dimitra Anastasiou and Rajat Gupta, “Comparison of Crowdsourcing Translation with Machine Translation,” p. 638, and Yves Gambier, “Denial of Translation and Desire to Translate,” p. 17. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
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28. See, e.g., Gilad Lotan, “Online Translation of Harry Potter 6 to Chinese” (2007), <<http://giladlotan.com/2007/06/online-translation-of-harry-potter-6-to-chinese/>> Website consulted February 6, 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Hye-Kyung Lee, “Participatory Media Fandom: A Case Study of Anime Fansubbing,” p. 1137. See also Penelope Sewell, “Students Buzz Round the Translation Class like Bees Round the Honey Pot – Why?” in *Translation in Undergraduate Degree Programmes*, ed. Kirsten Malmkjær (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Hye-Kyung Lee, “Participatory Media Fandom: A Case Study of Anime Fansubbing,” p. 1138. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Xiaochun Zhang, “Fansubbing in China,” *MultiLingual*, vol. 24, no. 5 (July/August 2013), p. 32. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. şebnem Susam-Saraeva, *Translation and Popular Music: Transcultural Intimacy in Turkish-Greek Relations* (Oxford and Bern: Peter Lang, 2015), p. 153. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
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39. Cf. *gloss translation* (Peter Low, “Translating Poetic Songs: An Attempt at a Functional Account of Strategies,” p. 103), a notion borrowed from Eugene Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating, with Special Reference to Principles and Procedures Involved in Bible Translating* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1964). [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
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42. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GZ0fzzDkH7E>> Website consulted May 21, 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
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46. For statistics, see <<http://www.tangotranslation.com/stats>> Website consulted May 21, 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. <<https://www.facebook.com/Translate.Turkish.Songs/info?tab=page_info>> Website consulted February 10, 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. For more examples, see: <<http://www.langeasy.com/hebrew7/songs.html>> Website consulted May 21, 2016, <<http://www.understandingspanish.net/learn-spanish/8-spanish-songs-for-kids/>> Website consulted May 21, and <<http://hellas-songs.ru/en/>> Website consulted February 10, 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Quite often, a site such as this can have an overall purpose which includes translation as a sub-activity. One such site promotes ”all things French” and explicitly harbours the goal of sharing ”awsome information about France and its language.” Song translation is part and parcel of this goal (<<http://frenchcrazy.com/2014/10/papaoutai-english-translation-stromae.html/>> Website consulted February 10, 2016). Furthermore, <<http://www.shira.net/lyrics.htm>> (Website consulted February 10, 2016) is a blog on belly dancing, where translations are provided for Middle Eastern song lyrics in order to help dancers get an idea of what emotions to express when dancing. Scoop Whoop (<<http://www.scoopwhoop.com/about/>> Website consulted February 10, 2016) is a community, ”an Internet Media Company for the online Indian. We create and curate India specific stories with the sole intent of helping it reach as many of us as possible.” This site includes a page where 30 Bollywood songs have been translated into English (by the page creator), with the additional feature of a comment field where visitors are encouraged to guess which Bollywood song has been translated and comment on the translations (<<http://www.scoopwhoop.com/humor/hindi-english-translation/>> Website consulted February 10, 2016). The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature also contains song lyric translations; the following is a link to a drinking song in translation into English: <<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/section5/tr55a.htm>> Website consulted February 10, 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. <<http://lyricstranslate.com/>> Website consulted February 9, 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. <<http://lyricstranslate.com/>> Website consulted February 9, 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Alberto Fernández Costales, “Collaborative Translation Revisited: Exploring the Rationale and Motivation for Volunteer Translation,” p. 15. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. <<http://lyricstranslate.com/en/faq#faq41>> Website consulted May 22, 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Cf. Anastasiou and Gupta’s psychological motivations mentioned earlier. Dimitra Anastasiou and Rajat Gupta, “Comparison of Crowdsourcing Translation with Machine Translation,” p. 641. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
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58. <<http://lyricstranslate.com/en/forum>> Website consulted May 22, 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
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62. Kata Csizér and Zoltán Dörnyei, “The Internal Structure of Language Learning Motivation and its Relationship with Language Choice and Learning Effort,” p. 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Penelope Sewell, “Students Buzz Round the Translation Class like Bees Round the Honey Pot – Why?” p. 155. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
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77. The lyric, its translation, the full discussion, and links to other relevant context for the example can be found at <<http://lyricstranslate.com/en/il-est-un-coin-de-france-theres-part-france.html#comment-298913>> Website consulted May 24, 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-77)
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