

**INTERLINGUAL RELATIONS**  
**Global Politics in a Polyglot World**

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## Preface

The last three decades has seen rapid growth in the number of states and universities that offer degrees in International Relations, with a corresponding growth in scholarly output and channels through which it may be published. This development has dovetailed with, and probably even stimulated, a widening of theories used and phenomena addressed. It is often argued that the result is a decentred discipline. While this may be true, it is also true that the resulting widening and deepening of our common investigation of phenomena that are relevant to international and global life means that future successful synthesising exercises will rest on firmer foundations than previous ones. It follows that we should continue to widen and deepen our scope of inquiry, and we should do it in such a way that we speak to the discipline at large.

By bringing previously neglected tasks of translation into the remit of IR, this book succeeds in doing exactly that. While it is true that poststructuralists have done work premised on the idea that we may understand global and international as language, and also on both textual and non-textual semiotic systems, the editors are right in arguing that the acts of translation themselves, as well as the social apparati that have been there to facilitate and execute it, have largely escaped our attention. I write largely, for there is some work on issues such as intentionally non-corresponding versions of treaties, but as we may see from the sources drawn upon in this volume, IR has come late to this particular ball. However, given that translation and translators are certainly part of those relations that we claim as our object of study, the important thing is that we are now finally joining the dance.

Translation spans from trafficking in simultaneous interpretation and period interpretation (spoken language), via translation in the narrow sense (written language) and translation of specific semiotic systems (interaction understood as intertextual), to attempts at making entire cultures legible to one another. Usage changes continuously, some languages have their span of usage reduced (e.g. Latin), others go through a revival (e.g. Hebrew), while yet others experience changes in annotation (e.g. Kazakh). An utterance is a piece of language that does a job in a context, so such processes involve translation.

This book is an agenda-setting one. It is therefore appropriate that phenomena of all these kinds receive attention. It is probably also appropriate that philosophical issues, such as the extent to which the categories of a language are determining for the world view of its bearers (the Sapir-Wharf hypothesis), what it means that language gains its meaning in its use (Wittgenstein) or whether language is best understood as referential or relational (de Saussure) take a back seat to concrete issues, such as the specific problems and effects of rendering a concept like sovereignty in a new language, or how different practices regarding the status of translators colour political outcomes. These are perennial issues. While it is a proven fact that some kind of communication will eventually materialise amongst the different detachments of our species, it is also impossible to imagine a world where problems of translation do not exist. I hope and believe that the scholarship on display here will inspire more IR scholars to do further empirical research on such matters, and that these studies will in turn inspire new syntheses regarding the role of language in relations between polities, as well as the structural roles that language plays for international relations.

*Iver B. Neumann*

## **Introduction: Global Politics in a Polyglot World: An Interlingual Turn in International Relations?**

*Mauro J. Caraccioli and Einar Wigen*

*By these were the isles of the Gentiles divided in their lands;  
every one after his tongue, after their families, in their nations.*

Genesis 10:5 (King James Version)

The fate of Gentiles seems like an odd place to begin. As much biblical commentary has established, part of the resonance of our opening epigraph is the way it connects the dispersal of Noah's descendants across the world to the events surrounding the rise and failure of the Tower of Babel (Steiner 1975; Britt 1996; Thompson 1999). Both narratives are part of the great origin myth whereby nations and their linguistic differences emerged unto the historical plane. Yet as we shall maintain here, the politics behind that myth could easily serve as an analogy for the state of International Relations (IR) as a scholarly field and its understanding of the real world social practices under its purview. Indeed, international relations seem just as old as the accounts comprising the Table of Nations and Babel's fragmentation of the world from a single whole into a million parts. But what does it take to establish and retain that kind of enduring meaning in the hallowed halls of academic inquiry and scholarly reflection?

In this book, we provide a framework for the study of global politics in a polyglot world. Just as the rise and fall of the Tower of Babel illustrates the ways in which language and identity are intertwined, so too do we find that international relations (and how IR scholars aspire to study these) is an inherently *interlingual* realm. What we aim to highlight is how that interlingual dimension is eschewed from the contemporary sociology of IR as a field and what difference a systematic understanding of translation in global politics would make for how IR is defined, practiced, and studied. Specifically, we see the task of defining interlingual relations as part of the politics of linguistic difference: what standards, metrics, norms, and conventions allow for some to speak about global politics at the expense of others? What is constructed and lost in the two-way exchange between linguistic and political diversity? And more problematically, on whose behalf does a hegemonic form of IR claim to speak to (and about) the rest of the world?

As others have recently shown (Stritzel 2014; Wigen 2018; Caraccioli et al. 2020), translation lies at the core of interlingual relations and has the potential to become a much needed corrective to what we and others see as IR's Anglophonic bias (Chan 1993; 2017). Beyond the task of meaning-making (Neufeld 1993; Wendt 1999), we understand the role of translation in global politics as one of *world-making* (Onuf 2012; Jordheim and Wigen 2018), whereby social roles, rules, and responsibilities are dramatized under narratives that establish the semblance of order, but which do not sound or mean the same to all actors. By increasingly looking beyond the West to integrate more insights on global human experiences into their theorizing (Sajed 2013; Tickner and Blaney 2013; Shilliam 2015), IR scholars have begun to more forcefully re-engage the links between interpretation and translation. In Lily Ling's (2002, 16) apt phrasing, "international relations [...] caters to a parochial, almost precious, view of the world," reflecting an understanding of global politics that "claims to apply across all time and space, eradicating in the process any mediation of world politics by race, gender, or other kinds of historical / cultural difference." Indeed, Ling's work is exemplary of these "other kinds" of difference, representing what Stephen Chan (2017, ix) describes as a process of "*worlding* - where different 'worlds' confront IR, interrogate it and demand that IR in turn interrogates them sympathetically."

Many of the recent efforts to disentangle the linguistic and interpretive liaisons informing the field's paradigms are grounded in earlier critiques of hegemonic meaning-making and "wording the world" (Spivak 1990, 7; Cherry 2002). Ignoring these moments of mutual interrogation between interlingual encounters hence risks further mirroring IR scholarship in linguistic bias, exclusively to our detriment (Bertrand et al. 2018). While much has been written on interpretation, translation studies have yet to rupture IR's status as an "American" social science (Hoffman 1977; Barder and Levine 2014; Oren 2016). Yet as we argue below, translation is the unacknowledged core not only of social scientific research on how politics takes place in languages other than English, but also of global politics itself. Our argument develops in three parts: first, we describe *interlinguality* as a mode of agency for different polities coming together, serving also as a conceptual frame through which translation acts as the centerpiece of global political exchange; second, we examine the extent to which contemporary IR research accounts for the interfaces at which languages meet, focusing on the role of intermediaries -- i.e.,

translators, as well as agents of commerce, ideology, and cultural exchange -- within contemporary IR theories, practices, and conceptual processes that are key to studying global politics; lastly, we reflect on interlinguality as an everyday thickness of global interactions and the glue that makes social worlds meaningful. What makes the trajectory of interlinguality doubly-relevant for contemporary IR scholars is its longstanding subjugation to the ends and means of empire, a relationship that we conclude remains evident today in the hegemony of Anglophonic reading, writing, and research.

### **Who Gets To Speak In/For International Relations?**

Global politics in a polyglot world is inherently interlingual. Yet in the context of contemporary IR scholarship, the world is made legible through two distinct moments of translation: via political processes occurring in other languages that are translated into English by journalists, bureaucrats, and a myriad outlets of popular culture; and by way of concepts made prominent within such an Anglophonic framework. At both instances, we find someone who may be working (and translating) at the interface of one or more languages. But when it comes to producing knowledge about all aspects of these exchanges, there is but one mother tongue. In addition to being an everyday practice of global politics, then, translation is a muted part of the method that any English-writing scholar employs when studying politics taking place in other languages. Linguistic turn scholarship in IR never drew the obvious conclusion that if different political communities use their political languages differently, then the interface of international politics involves mediation between different languages (see Debrix 2003; D'Aoust 2012). Translation is typically glossed over in IR's scholarly writings, where politics is always already made legible in English, reflecting the overlap between linguistic and institutional hegemony (Ruggie 1998). Yet the geographic composition of IR is but one (Kristensen 2015), among many social exceptions in need of unpacking to make sense of this peculiar yet systematic omission.

Whether the task is to decolonize the curriculum, bring a wider set of human experiences into our theorizing, or simply to study politics taking place in a language other than English, translation is by necessity part of what makes these goals attainable for IR scholars. Any intellectual engagement across a linguistic boundary involves translation. Because no two languages are the same, meaning changes in translation. More critically, however, meanings



change in politically significant ways, often to the strategic advantage (and disadvantage) of the actors involved (see e.g. Davison 1976). The politics of linguistic difference is therefore important for understanding how claims to political legitimacy and negotiations take place across linguistic boundaries. In European nation-states, the ideal has been for linguistic and political communities to be co-extensive, in which case domestic politics would take place in the national language and international politics (for a very select few) would involve more deliberate translating across linguistic differences. As the aftermaths of globalization, imperialism, and the spread of global capitalism have shown us, however, these ideals often come at the price of violence, exclusion, and ultimately subjugation or even annihilation (Steinmetz 2007).

Reality is of course more complex than what the myths of 1648 and Occidentalism tell us, with some countries sharing languages and others also using multiple languages for domestic politics. But this complexity does not belie the need for taking interlinguality seriously. Elites in former British colonies may communicate with other such elites in English. Beyond settler colonies, however, post-colonial elites need to translate, interpret or simply reformulate their political messages, not just when conducting international relations, but when engaging domestic constituents who do not use English (or another dominant language of colonialism) as their primary language. Although post-colonial state-to-state interfaces are often monolingual, global political configurations as such are typically interlingual. While it may not seem that way when privileging relations in the Anglosphere, conducting international politics in a single language is more of an exception than a rule. Interlingual relations are everywhere to be found, and although the labor expended to maintain them is seldom rewarded, they are the unacknowledged core of international relations.

As recent critical histories have offered, much of the canon of IR scholarship in the twentieth century was initially developed by fundamental drives to translate the demands of world powers to an ascendant Anglosphere – by colonial administrators as much as by diplomats, envoys, and intellectuals (see: Schmidt 1998; Morefield 2014; Vitalis 2015). Today our awareness of that landscape has changed, though in practice it remains a hegemonic affair. Indeed, a cursory look at the most popular journals of global politics reveals two ingrained scholarly trends that merit interrogation: first, the tenacity (and limits) of Anglophonic research; and second, the

instrumentalization of language as a mere means to a (pre-linguistic) end, particularly the ends of states. Below we question the value of both.

### **To Have and To Hold: What Languages Do in/for Politics**

At the heart of any inquiry highlighting the importance of translation for both the practice of international relations and scholarly inquiry into such relations, is the incommensurability of languages. Due to the uniqueness of historical experiences and how these have shaped language and culture, concepts in one language hardly ever mean *exactly* the same as those of another language (Wigen 2018, 43-49). Across languages, we can speak of these parallels as ‘translation equivalents’, rather than synonyms. Our claim is not that language determines human cognition and human behavior. Rather, we accept that if languages are not made up of identical elements, then the discourses that are possible to formulate in one language may not necessarily be identical when translated into another language. Following propositions from the “practice turn” in IR about the interconnectedness of discourse and practice (Neumann 2002; Leira 2019), we see discourses as setting the boundaries for acceptable practices differently in different languages. While many argue that discourses are uniquely contingent upon historical and contextual factors, it is impossible to accept that they are somehow instantiated identically in each of the different languages in which politics is conducted. Rather, translation happens at the interface between individuals and between communities (including states), and is a key practice in the conduct – discursive and otherwise – of international relations.

An emphasis on interlingual relations rather than relations between states offers a shift in perspective. Yet, it would be of little use if we substituted *languages* as organic wholes where before we had *states*. We therefore also aim to disaggregate the analysis of *where* languages are situated (i.e., the state, foreign ministries) and focus on the relations that the interaction of languages produce. All states have individuals who engage in interlingual practice. And international relations, as well as international organization(s), always have some component of interlinguality to them. Even where a state appears to operate in a single language, the study of international relations is the study of interfaces. Bilingualism and multilingualism are key abilities of those tasked with conducting relations and interfacing with other polities.

Indeed, these are such important features of international relations that they also impinge on the workings of monolingual functionaries, statesmen, diplomats, and politicians – perhaps without those monolinguals’ direct awareness. The importance of translation and interlinguality often gets obscured by the fact that in many international arenas, the people involved will have a single language imposed upon them by the context. Such a power differential, as Hans-Georg Gadamer once put it, has more than just practical consequences:

It is well known that nothing is more difficult than a dialogue in two different languages in which one person speaks one and the other person the other, each understanding the other’s language but not speaking it. As if impelled by a higher force, one of the languages always tries to establish itself over the other as the medium of understanding (Gadamer 2004, 386).

To speak of languages in the plural easily reifies ‘a language’ as a self-contained, finished whole. This is of course not the case, but for the sake of simplicity in staking out what interlingual relations consists of, we tend to speak of ‘natural languages’ whenever we use *language* in the plural. The fact of having to formulate one’s thoughts, make one’s claims, and legitimate one’s position in a language other than ‘one’s own’ overlaps with Gramsci’s definition of hegemony as "the ensemble of organisms" compromising the complex relation of domination exercised by civil society and the state (Gramsci 1971, 12; Wigen 2018, 64). This hegemony is typically invisible for those who enjoy its privileges and gloss over the politics of linguistic difference. Such glossing, moreover, not only makes a particular interpretation authoritative, but also mutes other forms of meaning that can only be made understandable as knowledge through translation, with the 'best' translators covering their tracks and any of the negotiation that needs to occur (Ives and Lacorte 2010). The hegemony of the English language in IR should not blind us from studying how this works in politics. Though hegemonic languages have been important in the development of political cultures and academic vocabularies, IR scholars need to broaden our scope of inquiry to understand how that position is established and maintained.

Beyond the broad concerns of Anglocentrism and the manipulation of cultural meaning, the study of interlingual relations aims to guide IR scholars interested in the polyvocality of

language beyond the space where two vernaculars meet. More provocatively, we seek to demonstrate that interlingual exchanges formulate the conditions through which inquiry and policy itself takes place. It is no accident that the English language's centrality as *lingua franca* of IR scholarship corresponds with passing of the baton from British empire to American hegemony. All empires aim to make the world in their own image; less clear is why some imperial idioms broaden their vocabulary, while others purposefully constrain it. Put more bluntly, why should territorial and commercial dominance preclude a space to investigate how other languages and ways of knowing conceive of the world? Unless, of course, that precisely is the point. The question is more than rhetorical, as budding scholars in search of academic employment can attest.

Our tentative suggestion would be that linguistic hegemony is not maintained by monolinguals, but by those who use a dominant tongue deliberately (and often inevitably) as a second language. Hence, linguistic outsiders acquire a stake in a language's hegemony, as well as both its literal and figurative reproduction (Picq and Cottet 2019). Yet our motivation is not merely about linguistic representation. Rather, what we aim to show is that translation takes place at all levels of global politics: from the procedural logics of international summits to the lives and encounters of translators themselves with other ways of being. The consequences of such moments are also rife with interlingual meaning: who speaks first, or second, at a summit often carries more weight than where it takes place; similarly, whom a translator speaks for can cause or be a cause of enduring legacies of conquest, conflict, and communion. In all, the vitality of language resides both in who speaks and who it speaks for, both of which are relationally configured.

Speaking about something as *interlingual* presupposes that languages are concrete things that can have relations. They are not (Derrida 1985, 225). Languages are abstractions, having no existence prior to our grouping different *lexa* together and calling them "language x". The obvious move is to go straight for a "speakers before languages" approach to interlingual relations (Jackson and Nexon 1999), acknowledging that languages in themselves are not things or actors that can have relations. Individuals engage in relations with other individuals. These individuals are the ones that make meaning and therefore the rules of language use.

It would be conceptually easier if we could say that individuals *have* a language, thus rendering linguistic politics as mere matters of instrumentalism. But there is a lack of common ground for discussing these phenomena and hence no reified analytical vocabulary that can be picked apart and critiqued. Translation and related phenomena are opaque and nebulous enough to speak and write about without introducing very circumspect ways of describing them. We believe, therefore, that it is useful to develop terms for discussing *roles* and *practices* in interlingual relations. To speak of interlingual exchange in such purposefully relational terms conveys not only what translation does, but what it creates from context to context. If nothing else, it illustrates how translation serves as a baseline of disagreement in political relations and can provide a background against which a more refined approach to their study may develop.

### **Limits to Intelligibility and the Global Politics of Linguistic Difference**

Linguistic boundaries are based on mutual unintelligibility between speakers. They may simply emerge because a group of people over time does not interact with another due to geographic distance and isolation. But unintelligibility may also be produced deliberately. A blatant example of the latter is that between Arabic and Hebrew, a tension that has emerged through deliberate Israeli nation-building that sidelines the language of Arabic-speaking Israelis (see: Levy 2014; Abboud et al. 2018). Although also a Semitic language that could potentially have had many commonalities with Hebrew (depending on how Hebrew was shaped in Israeli nation-building), Arabic is associated with Israel's Other. Despite the fact that many Jewish Israelis have or had Arabic as their mother tongues, and that Arabic is one of Israel's two official languages, its separation and distinctness from Hebrew is expediently politicized and policed.

Language is the primary medium of social interaction between humans and it is difficult to envision a relationship without some mutual meaning-making practices. Even if we were to claim that a specific dyad is “between a Greek-speaker and a Turkish-speaker”, the meaning made in the interaction would not be interlingual. Mutual intelligibility has to do with the potential for getting an intended outcome – be it simple, such as getting the correct food in a restaurant, or more complex, such as keeping a state of peace. As the social complexity of the intended outcome increases, the need for mutual intelligibility increases. The pictograms in a cheap restaurant menu may fully serve the purposes required to achieve the goal of 'getting a

spaghetti bolognese,' even if one does not speak Italian and the waiter speaks no English. At the other extreme, getting what one really intends from a marriage may require a mediator even when both spouses speak 'the same' language. What qualifies as 'mutually intelligible' therefore varies with the degree of social complexity. At the very extreme we run into the profound philosophical question of whether one ever really understands another human being; whether 'my meaning' can ever be fully translated, or, is at all commensurable with another person's meaning.

Our ontology thus aims to account for instances and processes of (un)intelligibility in global politics. Where incommensurability is about whether translation is *possible* on a more fundamental philosophical level, intelligibility is about whether translation is *necessary for mutual interaction* in a particular relationship. In other words, the latter is a question of whether translation is required for 'getting on with it'. If translation is required for ensuring the flow of social or political interaction between specific dyads in a network, then a pragmatic definition of interlinguality would entail attending to the dealings within a *multilingual* network (Hellmann 2009). We certainly borrow from insights developed by (post)structuralist IR scholarship, linking conceptions of global political power to reification processes by states, institutions, and armies (Der Derian and Shapiro 1989; Doty 1996; Epstein 2008). However, we go beyond these contributions by not only interrogating what people do with language and but also how the linguistic practices used by allegedly unitary political actors are in fact what make them seem impermeable. We maintain that the main way to recover the 'lost voices' of international relations is through translation and trying to make sense of what this entails for the practice and production of politics. By paying particular attention to the relational vibrancy that determines who has the authority to speak in IR, we also seek to show how translation is an *exercise of power* in the social world -- hence whoever controls its instantiation, wields power over its dissemination.

In actual practice, there are many interlingual boundaries that cannot be sharply delineated – such as between Hebrew and English speakers – because of the density of bilingual proficiency. This does not mean that there is no linguistic boundary, but rather that such a boundary is difficult to pin down as an illustrative example. The boundaries of incommensurability and unintelligibility are not inherent in 'a language', nor do they spring from language as such.

Rather, unintelligibility is an aspect of how a group of speakers relate to speech, utterances, statements, and symbols that are different from that which they themselves would use. Whether a speaker is understandable to me does not only depend upon some absolute measure of whether she speaks the same way I do, but how I have been trained to understand variation in linguistic expression. Hence, while Turkish speakers of Turkey typically are not trained to understand Azeri, Azeris will usually have no problem understanding Turkish. Likewise, someone who speaks Received Pronunciation (RP, or, “the Queen’s English”) is likely to be understood by a Glaswegian, but seldom the other way around – even though the latter also speaks 'English'. Although Castilian is the flagship language of the 'Spanish' nation, its multiple dialects are not equally intelligible (or recognized) across the Iberian peninsula, to say the least of its inheritors in the Americas and multiplicity of ways Creole Spanish is spoken.

One-way unintelligibility is thus sometimes produced by a group for the purposes of not having outsiders understand what the in-group says, most notably representatives of the state. It is also the product of received and established norms of intellectual production, for example, whereby attaining bi- or multilingualism is often regarded as a heroic feat in one place, while prevalent across others. What we are ultimately interested in, then, is *language-in-action*; not just that language constitutes meaning, but also that *how* people do things with language is part of the constitutive process. Perhaps the closest thing we have to a pragmatist sense of truth.

### **Mediation and Interlingual Method**

We have so far sketched some of the broad, everyday life dimensions of translation. Now we turn to more systematic examinations, particularly those by IR scholars who implicitly rely on translation and the politics of linguistic difference in their work. Most of what has previously been done in IR on the matter of translation has approached the languages of politics rather than the politics of languages. The weak point here has been that *doing* translation in a metaphorical or conceptual sense (Best and Walters 2013; Bilgin 2016; Georgi 2019; Jackson and Nexon 2019; Minami 2019) has come in the way of studying or listening-in on translation (Liu and Ricks 2012; Kratochwil 2014; Donnelly 2015; Wigen 2015; Subotic 2019). So what is missing in the study of interlingual interpretation is the study of interpretation unfolding in practice, or rather, interpretation as an *intermediary practice*. How do we make sense of the difference

between operating in one language and relating that exchange to someone else in another? This is very different from being a field interpreter dealing with tactical, logistic, or even existential challenges that leave little room for reflection. It is also a task aided, to be sure, by proficiency in a second (or more) set of languages, but also the disposition to know the difference.

### **Translation as Mediation in International Relations**

The underlying conditions for the binary treatment of translation as metaphorical at one end and interpretive at another are relevant at three levels in contemporary IR theorizing, specifically the kind of works concerned with a broader, more “global” IR. First, there is Amitav Acharya’s (2018) claim that we should draw upon non-Western scholarship for our theoretical takes that better explain certain phenomena, and thereby destabilize and challenge the Eurocentrism and Anglocentrism that suffuses the social sciences. Reformulating such theoretical propositions in a social science language, and in English, is a translation in a metaphorical or conceptual sense: doing, but not reflecting. The second level is translation as an implicit and unacknowledged part of IR’s method, applied when scholars deal with non-English material, which sees translation as a pragmatics: doing, in order to better understand difference. Works in IR’s ‘linguistic turn’ that look to non-English discourses for their material, such as *Russia and the Idea of Europe* (Neumann 1999), are feats of this second order kind of translation – Russian meaning is re-rendered and explained in English. There are but a handful of linguistically substantive works in this vein (Jackson 2006; Rumelili 2007; Sajed 2013; Shilliam 2015), but none of these scholars reflect upon how translation is part of their method of writing research. There are also surprisingly little assessments or discussion of English-language works in IR translated into non-dominant languages. Translation remains a practice, but not one that reflexively shapes the world of the translator. The third level is where we situate our intervention, namely the empirical material that IR scholars study, where translation, interpretation, and the experiential fact of polyglot actors are key features of how the relations under scrutiny are configured, yet are left untheorized within the same project.

IR discussions have increasingly come to use the two concepts of “the international” and “the everyday” (albeit not always in the same work) in a similarly unreflective manner. While we are supportive of this shift in scholarly attention to more micropolitical dynamics, putting these two



frames together shows how the everyday practices of an international sphere are frequently interlingual, and when they are not, their relations can hardly be said to be truly global. Monolingual relations are exclusive, whether they take place in the hegemonic languages of international politics, such as English – with French, Russian, and Spanish trailing far behind – or in smaller languages like Norwegian, isiZulu, or Wolof. Attempts to theorize relations beyond the Anglosphere or decolonise academic knowledge – which are, in practice, two different academic ambitions – cannot do without a critical engagement with interlingual relations.

### **Informants and Intermediaries**

Although global politics tends to shift attention both from Euro-America and from the state as the sole political actor, any take on the relationship between interlingual relations and global politics needs to posit how the state fits into the picture. We do not intend this as a means of reproducing IR's state-centric bias, but rather as an acknowledgement of the untoward hegemony that states hold in our linguistic imaginaries and the obstacles to decentering that influence. States may be involved in interlingual relations in two ways: either horizontally, in its relations with other states, or vertically, at the interface between state and subjects. In addition to this, there are the horizontal connections made by subjects who, for example, create transnational social movements and 'peoples' diplomacy' that are also often configured in interlingual relations. These are attempts at mobilizing across linguistic boundaries and in opposition to states and governments "above" them. Where elites speak a different language from the commoners, domestic governance takes the form of interlingual relations. Where each polity is monolingual in different languages, international politics takes place in interlingual relations. World politics is neither purely one or the other of these ideal types, but a combination of the two – with some more complexity thrown in. Global politics is not only the sum of state governance domestically, foreign policy conducted "outwards" from the state, and that which takes place in international organizations. It is itself the result of the politics of linguistic difference as played out across these spheres.

Except in a relatively small set of dyads (in global terms), state elites either have to translate when interacting with foreigners or when facing their own citizens or subjects. Moreover, subjects typically have to translate their interaction with people from other communities – often

users of other languages – whether those are within the same polity or abroad. If we see relations between individuals as a social network, some individuals are bound to end up as bridges between different clusters. This is merely a feature that crops up in almost any network. As Marc Granovetter (1973) has pointed out, such bridges are particularly valuable and can profit from their ability to connect clusters. Let us for now call these linguistic vectors ‘organic’ intermediaries. These include diaspora and border populations who engage in what is called *translanguaging* – that is, pragmatically combining different languages – on a near-daily basis. In some cases, this is sustained over such a long period of time by such a large group that the practices result in what may be called a new language.

The other value along this axis is more formalized intermediaries, who neither officially represent their own polity nor are involved in brokerage as part of a network, but who are hired to serve as a temporary bridge. As intermediaries are positioned differently within power hierarchies over time, they not only have to apply their linguistic skills differently, but increasingly provide a scaffolding for thinking about how translation is conducted by people embedded in relations of power. Accounting for broader networks of intermediaries, such as the ones that encompass the massive formal channels of global politics, requires making sense of those actors who do mediation at the interface between collectives, groups, cultures or languages, but who are not official state representatives. In sum, interlingual mediation takes place across spaces, places, times, and polities, both as a feature of what the polity does, at the interface between the state apparatus and its subjects, as well as at the interface with other polities. We turn now to unpacking how the fluidity between intermediaries, polities, and the interlingual relations they facilitate serves as the glue between global polities.

### **Brokerage and Liminality**

The tasks of translation and interpretation typically fall to someone who has some bilingual proficiency, who ends up playing the role of mediator either by design or by default. This is in some ways a privileged position in that it entails being a bridge tying together network clusters. Yet this is also a role fraught with risk and demanding labor whose value is seldom recognized (de Jong 2018). Though merchants use this role specifically for profit, it is seldom the labor of translation itself that is profitable. While not anyone can play the role of mediator, mediators are

no homogeneous category of people. There are certain skills required of them and what is called *brokerage* often gives a mediator personal competitive advantage (Granovetter 1973; Burt 2011). Some act as private individuals, others act in their capacity as state representatives. Some act as informal mediators to help out in everyday life, others are formally hired to interpret or translate.

What is quite common, though, is that the work of the mediator is usually only visible when he or she fails and communication across the linguistic boundary breaks down, resulting in misunderstandings, confusion, or outright hostility between individuals or groups. Successful mediation is *invisible* mediation. Mediation and translation happens, by definition, at some kind of boundary. Without the boundary, there would be no need for mediation. Boundaries are often contested and contestation imbues them with particular importance – what Slavenka Draculic called “being pinned to the wall of nationhood” (Brubaker 1996, 20). Many social boundaries are therefore the result of deliberate boundary-making and boundary-maintenance. This is what makes the mediator’s position so perilous. By transcending a social boundary that is the subject of contestation, or which some are trying to imbue with much political significance, a person playing the role of mediator can easily become considered a *liminal*: someone who is “betwixt and in-between” and whose identity within either of the groups is questioned (Rumelili 2007, 64-94). This, however, does not need to be the case, especially since modern states started educating “their own” as translators (as well as pre-modern ones; see Fausz 1987; Scully 2005). Liminality was reduced significantly for those occupying formal mediation roles on behalf of the state. Yet their interlingual labor is no less crucial.

All communication entails some loss, distortion, and transformation of meaning, but the transformation of that meaning typically increases in interaction across social boundaries. Social communities are often associated with a particular set of meaning-making skills, in-group expressions, and specific symbolism. All contact between political and social communities therefore involves some degree of mediation. Nation-states typically spring out of and consider a particular social group its primary constituency. Hence, the constituencies of nation-states also have their group-specific sets of meaning-making practices.

Since the late nineteenth century, states have often tried to impose this common language upon the whole political community through education, as well as restricting state services and rights to those who can claim them in the state's preferred language. For a nation-state, mediation and translation is primarily legitimate in its interaction with resident non-citizens and with representatives of other states, using other ways of making meaning (de Jong 2016). The bulk of work entailed in a future interlingual relations research program would be exploring the archive of ways in which states capture, engage, and codify their interactions with both internal and external non-citizens. This positions research in interlingual relations as a parallel endeavor to efforts in genealogy, historiography, and historical institutionalism, among other cognate fields overlapping with IR (Vucetic 2011; Schmidt and Guilhot 2019; Fioretos 2017). While we can ground the existence of interlingual exchanges historically, the true litmus test for IR's own particular need for an interlingual relations research program will become clearer as the field reconciles its imperial origins with the coming transformations of the 21st Century.

### **Translation Before Relations: Imperial Entanglements of the Linguistic Kind**

As historians of international political thought have shown, the metaphorical translation of the imperial past is fundamental for understanding the origins of the field's linguistic norms. Empires have accelerated vast encounters central to the development of concepts, theories, and paradigms in global politics (Jahn 2000; de Carvalho, Leira, and Hobson 2011; Caraccioli 2021). Yet as that same scholarship shows, these translations are usually in the service of a political (and linguistic) status quo, regardless of how an interlingual encounter between one or more vernaculars took place (Cheney 2017; Caraccioli 2018). Put more succinctly, imperial knowledge production has been doubly attentive to translation - first, as a means of establishing dominance over others; and second, by naturalizing subjugation via hierarchy.

There is an unevenness, however, in the application of this relational principle, one which we argue follows linguistic preferences before cultural ones. A brief example of this selective privileging of translation can be found in narratives of imperial decay and decline. Recent work in the political theory of empire has excavated the ways intellectuals of statecraft in the Anglo-American empires, as well as prominent thinkers and commentators more generally, have deflected attention from their society's imperial projects in times of crisis. Imperial decline, they

argue, is always accompanied by tropes and narratives about how one state's behavior towards the peoples of other states is not a reflection of 'who we are' but rather a deviation from some set of originalist beliefs. As Jeanne Morefield describes it:

Calling the empire something else, or encouraging an empire that has refused to say its name to do so, are both salvage efforts, attempts at repair and recuperation, despite the fact that the thinkers who theorize these transitions often do so in the name of innovation and a canny break with the past...when the linguistic status of the word empire itself was and is in flux and decline seems to loom ominously on the horizon, imperialists turn to narratives that both consolidate and legitimate the empire's power and naturalize its liberal character, at the same time they deflect attention away from its violence and illiberalism (Morefield 2014, 7).

And while Morefield and others draw attention to the ways in which intellectuals behave and perform their rhetorical deflection for domestic audiences, the broader interlingual context of imperial ascendance and decline is left untheorized. That omission is common across critiques of liberal imperialism, the result perhaps of being in the same Anglophonic context of production whereby British and American intellectuals (as well as everyone else who might want to weigh-in) debate the impact of their political hegemony. Even scholarly work that attends to the rhetorical dynamics of global politics must do so under the hegemony of the English language.

Indeed, the challenge we are raising here is the product of disputes and debates too far-ranging to adequately address in their entirety. Yet one way in which we can make sense of them is through the phenomenon of imperial hitchhiking: taking advantage of preexisting relations of power so as to avoid the burdens of managerial responsibility (Macallister 2018). In a scholarly context, imperial hitchhiking is what allows thinkers, institutions, and governments across the world to 'have their say' in the marketplace of ideas without having to build-up the networks of power that support knowledge economies (Kamola 2019). More specifically, the hegemony of the American academy is the price of academic imperial hitchhiking. Whether knowledge is produced in one vernacular or another is secondary; what matters is the accessibility and distribution of the intervention for an English-language market. To that end, the stigma of

multilingualism needs to be addressed somewhere, particularly as that bias generates and foments distinct in-group and out-group alignments across the field (Adler-Nissen 2014). All of us in the periphery fit in to the broader field of Anglophone global politics only on very specific terms (i.e., monolingualism); and once we highlight knowing multiple languages, there is a certain unease within that same field, an unease from the fact that we know things other people don't know and experience the politics of translation at its most literal sense.

Hence the question facing the study of interlingual relations past and present is how to speak to an audience that sees translation as merely functionalist, without your outgroup alignment breaking apart?

### **Conclusion**

*And the Gileadites took the passages of Jordan before the Ephraimites: and it was so, that when those Ephraimites which were escaped said, Let me go over; that the men of Gilead said unto him, Art thou an Ephraimite? If he said, Nay; Then said they unto him, Say now Shibboleth: and he said Sibboleth: for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him, and slew him at the passages of Jordan: and there fell at that time of the Ephraimites forty and two thousand.*  
– Judges 12: 5-6 (King James Version)

Interlingual relations is the unacknowledged core of global politics. In this article, we set out a new research agenda for how to study this phenomenon and to bring its problems and insights into dialogue with questions of International Relations. To see interlingual relations as the intertwining of language and identity is by itself not a new contribution. But if we attend to the *relational* portion of the term - that is to say, the politics of linguistic difference - we attend to a dynamic that is political because it is translational. Interpretation and translation have both been studied academically, or, if you will, scientifically. There already exist degrees in interpretation and translation studies. Yet the questions that are asked are often specific to this field, which to some extent emerges out of either comparative literature or linguistics.

The study of translation has gone through a sequence of turns worthy of a slalom course, with a cultural turn, a discursive turn, its practice turn, and a post-colonial turn – turns that should be

familiar to theoretically sophisticated scholars of global politics (for an overview, see Venuti 2000; for a postcolonial interpretation, see Bassnett and Trivedi 1999). For all these developments in translation studies, however, there is little reception of this scholarly literature in the study of global politics, let alone IR more narrowly conceived. That is to say, few have brought this literature into conversation with IR concerns, and almost none have sought to answer research questions emerging within an IR context of an empirical material consisting of interpretation or translation. Our primary concern here is to lay out a program for how to do the latter: how and why we should seek to answer questions of global politics by reference to translation and interpretation. In the process, we draw upon and aim to further engage literature already concerned with translation within other contexts, particularly at the micro-historical levels and exchanges of intermediaries in global politics.

In trying to capture what happens at the interface between different linguistic groups and relate that to questions of International Relations, the above observations are themselves reflections of *the global politics of translation*. Whether it is about whose voices get included in conquest narratives, whose civilizational culture gets privileged in the history of international order, or, the very ethos under which scholars and practitioners alike labor to understand the intricacies of everyday words, the power of translation does not lie in its utility as the background, or, setting through which global exchange and action happens, but as *the means* through which global politics makes any sense at all.

It is a founding myth of European (i.e., Christian) diplomacy that diplomats do the work of angels, trying to create peace between God's children after they were scattered across the globe and divided by language (Neumann 2012). Yet language and linguistic difference is a constitutive part of how nations across the world have understood relations between peoples, communities, and states. The insight is at once fundamental and easily overlooked, as linguistic difference is both difficult to speak about – we have no meta-language from which to study it – and is itself obscured in translation. Apart from Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), which tends to study the domestic pathways to making a particular state decision, International Relations is a discipline devoted to the study of the interface and to the practices of those who act on behalf of and mediate between states. By ignoring the interlinguality of this particular setting and of

relations between these individuals and communities, IR fails to study what we argue is the unacknowledged core of international relations – namely *interlinguality* – and hence continues to reproduce a parochialism suitable only for scholarship that chooses to close itself off to the world. Interlinguality can only be ignored by people who take Wittgenstein’s (2001, 68) proposition that “the limits of my language mean the limits of my world” literally to the point of satire. In practice, it is to say that the limits of IR’s world are the limits of the Anglosphere. As the study of global politics moves both beyond state-centric approaches and beyond the Anglosphere, it cannot do without a theoretical reflection upon the importance of interlinguality.

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