A GLOBAL POLITICS OF TRANSLATION?
INTERROGATING THE BBC WORLD SERVICE

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Studying the BBC World Service: A Multi-Disciplinary Paradox

Although it beggars belief that one of the world’s most authoritative broadcasters has never been studied in detail by total outsiders, there are some simple explanations. Assuredly, there are excellent studies of the BBC in Britain (INSERT REFS FROM BORN 2005 via BRIGGS TO SEATON AND WEBB), just as there is a plethora of in-house research, official documentation, commissioned research, and official but impartial historiography. There is even systematic research on the BBC World Service’s outreach as an international agent of development both democratic and economic (Skuse 2005), especially through the BBC World Service Trust, as well as official and independent enquiries into the BBC World Service’s crucial claim and global aura: that of impartiality as an absolute value (CITE REPORT ON IMPARTIALITY 2006). Whatever a critic might say, the World Service’s self-critical reflexivity is second to none that any school of academics could claim. Yet the lacuna we indicated persists and is anchored in the very nature of the BBC World Service. All totally independent research access to the World Service depends upon a conjunction between the World Service itself and its paymasters at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the British ministry of foreign affairs. Since both these institutions conjoined in tolerating our research,
the Arts and Humanities Research Council (UK) picked up the bill to keep the research independent and impartial – the claim not only voiced by the BBC World Service, but fundamental to academic research. This conjunction brought into sharper focus the classic riddle of the World Service.

The BBC World Service is widely regarded as the world’s most respected international voice. It addresses most countries and their political, economic or religious diasporas in English and dozens of other languages. It enjoys an unequalled aura of impartiality, although most of its critical listeners know that it is, to put it simply, a state broadcaster. Even the ‘vernacular’ services change or get axed as world constellations change in the view of the British government’s perceptions of global geo-politics. Yet still, its multi-media platforms from radio through television to the internet regularly reach an unrivalled five per cent of the world’s adult (16+) population. So we face the paradox of the world’s most global broadcaster which, however, is almost entirely financed by one nation-state government. It would be little wonder if such a state-paid global broadcaster came from rich neutral Switzerland or the impoverished neutral United Nations. Yet how can the BBC World Service, paid by the ex-colonial power *par excellence*, retain and constantly re-invent this aura in the world, even when its paymasters are sometimes maligned as post-colonial revanchists or neo-colonial ‘poodles’ to transatlantic interests?

Before offering some answers, we needed a theoretical framework anchored in other independent projects about the BBC World Service ‘under the same roof’. These other projects concerned the World Service’s positions vis-à-vis:

(1) Diasporic Nationhood, with special reference to Iran (Sreberny et al.),
(2) Religious Transnationalism, with special reference to Islam (Herbert et al.),
(3) The BBC’s Geo-Cultural Politics of Sports (Woodward et al.)
(4) The BBC’s Cultural Politics of Music (Toynbee et al.), and
(5) The BBC Trust: Edu-tainment for Overseas Development (Skuse et al.)

To pursue all fellow projects interactively ‘under the same roof’, we needed a shared theoretical framework, and we have adapted this from Gillespie and Toynbee (see 2006) who charted a useful interdisciplinary conceptual triad:
This triad is, of course, heuristic, that is, to be tested by the empirical results it enables one to see. Clearly, it is not (1) the institutional power structures that can guarantee an aura of impartiality, and certainly not for a state broadcaster like the BBC. Rather, one needs to examine (2) the micro-politics of texts and discourses, especially in the light of the World Service’s key job which is, after all, translation in the widest sense. Yet neither result is valid or even credible unless it is (3) triangulated with the audiences and their subjectivities, in empirical terms the users and their input (using), output (spreading) and feedback (to the institution itself). What we thus needed was a much wider definition of The Politics of Translation: one that would take us beyond a politics of language in socio-linguistic terms. Instead, we wanted to accommodate all our crucial data, not least the ‘intangibles’, those data that always emerge from qualitative research and that so often get stuck in a file named: ‘true but hard to publish.’

Yet if one places the BBC World Service at the centre of this heuristic triad, then each of our projects grows by a threefold combination of methods: institutional and archival research wants to be combined with textual and discourse analyses, and the results must be triangulated with qualitative research among producers and users. As will be evident later on, different empirical cases of examining the BBC’s Politics of Translation demand slightly different emphases, not least also because of differential modalities of access. On the face of it, indeed, they may even seem to share but one commonality: the BBC World Service faced with three incomparable situations of war, civil war, or international war. Yet each of the contributions addresses all three poles theoretically by way of a shared methodological proposition, namely, the breaking up and differentiating the cover-all term of ‘translation.’
The *prima facie* differences among our three cases are obvious, covering the World Service for speakers of Arabic, of the languages formerly called ‘Yugoslavian’ by the BBC, and of Tamil and Sinhala for Sri Lankan nationals and diasporas. So we should perhaps spend a short paragraph on rationalizing this choice of indicative sampling. On the choice of the Arabic-language service, there will be little doubt as to its relevance. With an audience of 12.4 million consumers tuning in once a week or more, and with the global political constellations pitched as they are, the relevance seems obvious, not least as the World Service axed nearly a dozen radio language services to launch an Arabic-language television channel in 2008. Yet the World Service’s growth regions (2001-06) were prominently in India, Indonesia, Kenya, Nepal, and Nigeria. Even the consumers of the Hindi services number 16 million, and that is discounting all those who prefer the BBC in English or Urdu, Pashto, Bengali, Tamil or Sinhalese. Yet clearly, the choice reflects a Bush House rationality, not least a rationality based on geo-political ecologies. Turning to South Asia, the island of Sri Lanka is blessed with two vernacular BBC services, one in Tamil, the other in Sinhalese. Here, we find an example of British ex-colonial bonds which veer, as we shall explain, between paternalism and ethnicization. In former Yugoslavia, on the other hand, the BBC condensed its services for Croats, Bosnians, and Serbians into one service, now called ‘in Serbian’, although it is understood and used from Slovenia to the FYR of Macedonia. In each of these cases, it can only be the World Service’s role in geo-political public diplomacy that explains the seeming, though certainly efficient, paradoxes of coverage.

The juxtaposition of these three ‘odd cases out’ can even be sharpened by a few initial comparisons. In former Yugoslavia, ‘the West’ is seen, and seen by the World Service, as a key actor, be it based on NATO warfare or an EU-led United Nations administrations, Montenegrin independence or Kosovo’s ‘supervised independence’, and the future plans to finally dismantle or finally domesticate Serbia. The World Service’s taboos confirm the constellation: rampant corruption of UN-supervised administrations in Bosnia and Kosovo are taboo, indictments at the International Criminal Court are top headlines. On its two services for Sri Lankans, the BBC maintains a pained pretence of ethnic neutrality, yet also colludes, wittingly or not, in sharpening the ethnic fronts of a civil war that is ‘no business of the West.’ In the single Arabic-language service of the BBC that stretches from Morocco via Egypt and the Saudi Peninsula to Iraq, the balance of taboos is most complex: here, the World Service cannot blend out Palestine, the common or surrogate cause of all its Arab audiences, yet it must also report the geo-political imperatives of the British and American governments.
Are we then comparing incomparables with these three case studies? – No, we are not, and certainly far less so than the BBC World Service’s global politics of translation must do every day. To find a coherence that equals that of the BBC World Service, we may return, as a theoretical compass, to the adapted heuristic triangle of Gillespie and Toynbee (see 2006).

Thus Bulic on the Balkans shows (1) the institutional and power structures that allowed the BBC World Service first to help make, and then to help break, the fragile, fractious, and sometimes fictitious unity of the former Yugoslavia, in order then (2) to use textual and discourse analyses to help us understand why (3) ex-Yugoslav audiences continue to use the BBC World Service despite their near-universal doubts about that institution’s impartiality. Thiranagama on Sri Lanka, on the other hand, has to explain (1) which institutional and power structures turned the two BBC World Services aimed at Sri Lankans into two near-incommensurate ethnicized and ethnicizing voices, how (2) the textual techniques and even discursive tricks of the BBC relate to a deep-seated expectation of the BBC acting as an impartial arbiter, and how (3) the converging subjectivities of two diverging audiences are fused in the production process itself. Jaber, analysing the BBC World Service in Arabic, has the inverse problem: (1) the institutional and power structures that bestow two World Services on one smallish island insist on treating the entire Arabic-speaking world from Morocco via Palestine to Iraq as one unitary audience, yet they also decided to launch a forbiddingly expensive Arabic-language television technology in 2008. He must thus turn to (2) a subtle analysis of discourses and texts in a highly competitive Middle Eastern media market, so as to explain why (3) the audiences may or may not reward the institutional decisions made at Bush House. So we must find a way by which all three contributions can share a common methodology to compare the seemingly incomparable.

Comparing the Incomparable:
Translation = Transporting, Translating, Transposing, Transmitting

Originally, the three contributions here offered saw their focus, The Politics of Translation, as a matter of linguistic translation. Initial questions looked simple at first sight, because they were phrased in socio-linguistic and politico-linguistic terms. In Bulic’s case of the former Yugoslavia, does the BBC call Kosovo a province or a region or a UN-supervised territory? In Thiranagama’s case of the BBC amid the Sri Lankan civil war, how is the same English-
language news for all Sri Lankans translated differently into the Tamil Service or the Sinhala Service? In Jaber’s case of the Arabic-language Service, which one of ten possible words does the BBC use and choose when to describe a man who blows up himself and unknown others: even in English, there are a dozen opaque boundaries between a hero and a martyr, a terrorist and a freedom fighter, a suicide bomber and an insurgent, an insurgent and a rebel, a revolutionary and a murderer, and so on.

To confound the case, even Britain and its World Service are situated differently in each of the three war zones. In former Yugoslavia, the BBC speaks as the military backbone, but also the public diplomacy sweetheart of the European Union and NATO. In Sri Lanka, it speaks as a paternalist ex-colonial power and denies any Western involvement. In the Middle East, the BBC must combine three British roles at once: historically a co-cause of the Palestine / Israel desparation; currently militarily involved; and aspiring, as we write, to defeat Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiyya by a forbiddingly costly television service in Arabic. So we found in all three cases and on all common-sense criteria, we had to broaden the concept of translation and to deepen the linguistic metaphor systematically to accommodate the wealth of data assembled. What we came up with, to render researchable the abiding question about the BBC’s paradoxical aura of global impartiality despite its paymasters’ positions, was an analysis of the concept of translation itself. We break translation down into four processes: transporting to the World Service, translating at the World Service, transposing in the process, and transmitting to audiences deliberately segregated or deliberately fused.

On transporting, one is first tempted to play the naïve positivist: stuff comes into Bush House or its regional centres, it gets filtered there, and then goes out, give or take an inevitable dose of motivated selectiveness. Yet even the raw input into the World Service is subject to external repressions as well as internal adjudications. External repressions are common in repressive states, and the BBC must make daily decisions on how to save, or how far to risk, the life chances of stringers, reporters and correspondents. In a case such as Zimbabwe under Adolf Mugabe, the BBC can be proud to preface its coverage by a reminder that ‘the BBC is banned from working in Zimbabwe, and we therefore report from Johannesburg.’ Regardless of any British inglorious deal in delivering Zimbabweans into Mugabe’s hands, one nearly wants to ask all the BBC’s competitors from the USA and Africa why they cannot share that accolade of being banned by a genocide-scale war criminal. As an example of internal adjudications, one may think of BBC World, the BBC World Service’s commercial television
The World Service insists on a gender-neutral policy of employment at home and abroad, but judiciously advises female stringers, reporters or correspondents in Muslim states to wear a headscarf, so as not to jeopardize the BBC’s access to the free transporting of data. (Imagine the BBC were banned from reporting from inside Iran.) Some anecdotal evidence also points to in-house exceptions applied to the well-convened lines of transporting. Thus, my colleague Lotte Hoek reports how an unexceptional flood crisis in Bangladesh was promoted into world-wide headlines because one unknown stringer delivered exceptional camera footage together with a touch-the-world text, and that direct to Bush House.

In the present collection, we have similar cases: Bulic on ex-Yugoslavia highlights some ‘parachute journalists’ flown in to offer the world an instant analysis based on no local or even linguistic knowledge; and Jaber’s Middle East is replete with correspondents who know more fellow journalists than Arabic words. And who has not seen the embarrassing scenes of one or another past-it BBC icon ‘covering’ Perú today and ‘doing’ Sudan tomorrow. If transporting ever appeared as the royal road for the facts to reach Bush House, it has now become a complex dynamic. It concerns silly in-house factors, but also national politics and geo-political British and media priorities, international factors among both states and competing or world media, and insider judgements on what to invite or allow into the in-tray in the first place. Two of the top practitioners of the World Service, Graham Mytton and Andrew Taussig, have explained similar historic constellations in their just-published memoranda (REFERENCE TO HJ---- 2008 PLEASE).

On translating in the literal sense, the next step to understand translation in the abstract sense, matters seemed promising at first. Speaking of Jaber’s field, the Middle East, how does the BBC World Service translate the title of the genocidal President of the Sudan? Does it use the popular but neutral term *ra’iis* (lit. ‘head’), the populist but propagandist *qa’iid* (lit. ‘leader [of all]’) or the military title *haqiid* (‘colonel’) that casts doubt on his legitimacy as ‘President’? – The inverse problem is found with double legitimations, as in Morocco, where the king (*al-malik*) is also the *sultaan*, a title abolished by the colonial French regime, but nonetheless legitimated as the *‘amiir al-mu’miniin* (lit. ‘Commander of the Faithful’).

Similarly, the Arabic term *madaniyya* (lit. ‘town square’) allows no distinction between a top-down state-sanctioned version of democracy versus a bottom-up civic forum, or indeed between a politically neutralized public sphere or a civil rights-conscious civil society, just as *dimukratiyya* may be replaced by the Quránic *shuura* (lit. ‘audience, consultation’) that
stresses a ruler’s democratic virtue of listening and, - rather scarce in Western democracies, -
daily accessibility. How, conversely, does one translate the lobbyists’ term NGO into a
language that encapsulates the twin ideals of madaniyya combined with shuura? – Even
Habermas wearing his garb of ‘constitutional patriotism’ would wonder, as he would about
international legal nomenclature in the case of Bulic’s data on former Yugoslavia. In
Thiranagama’s paper on Sri Lanka, you will not find the BBC’s global shorthand of ‘Tamil
Tigers’, but only the more neutral acronym LTTE or, if pressed, a quote-within-quotes ‘The
Tigers’. Yet somehow, this narrow focus on words as words only offered transient interest:
World Service editors are clever and seasoned enough to massage these word-for-words ad
sensum and in context, just as they know when to call the Queen of the United Kingdom
either ‘the Queen’ or ‘the Lord Protector of the Anglican Church’ or just ‘Queen Elizabeth.’
Some exceptions are given by all three ethnographers, but they know to treat them as
anecdotes, telling perhaps but not often demonstrably partisan. What matters more is what is
translated at all from one language service to another, or what is left out altogether, but we
shall come to that when we address the decisions on transmitting.

On the third intervention, transposing, we have hi-jacked a word best known from the
vocabulary of musicians, for in music, transposition is a self-evident transformation. Just
listen to Bach’s ingenious cigar piece ‘Air on the G-String’ when played by a French Horn in
E-flat or a saxophone in B, each with their own transpositions so different from a violin’s. All
of them are merely transpositions, for they play the same notes in the same sequence and
rhythm; yet they play them in different keys, and that seemingly technical transposition
awakens near-incommensurable impressions in the audience, ranging from consolation to
melancholy. ‘The tone makes the music,’ as musicians say, and as every newsreader knows,
the tiniest inflexion in tone can mean the difference between reading to you, reading at you, or
reading past you. Aurally, the main criteria are accentuation and stress, both especially
cultivated in radio; visually and on television, these criteria are augmented by a régien en mis-
en-scène that securely distinguishes between gravity and a smile, a smirk and a grin. The
differences concern, admittedly, intangibles: not easily verbalised, but familiar to all reflexive
audiences, and it was to catch some of the intangibles that we introduced the metaphoric term
transposing.

Even regardless of performance, students of television know that any addition of the visual
transposes the aural. Just as the film of the book you have read is never as good as the book
you filmed in your own head, so the aural news with pictures added is never the same as the radio news. Pictures can up-scale or down-scale the impact of events, and they can front-stage or back-stage their implications and their audiences’ differential ‘readings’. These classic truths, however, must be traced into the minutiae of transposing techniques. One good example is dubbing, as confirmed by Jean Seaton, the BBC’s current and most independent-minded historian. According to Seaton (XXX o.c. at first Ld conf), changing conventions on dubbing spelled a conceptual change in how one sees and communicates other people’s identities. For a thought experiment, just imagine the BBC dubbing an Arabic-speaking President with a vernacular accent that sounds like the refugee next door, or dubbing a bereaved Sri Lankan bomb survivor in an Oxford accent (as happens sometimes). The literal translating of words into words is usually near-always infallible or unfaultable in the BBC’s hands; yet transposing renders intangibles tangible, and it is often the intangibles that lend the aura of impartiality to the BBC World Services. A second example of transposing as a step of transformation lies in the language registers chosen. Here, it is useful to contrast Bulic on Yugoslavia with Thiranagama on Sri Lanka. For formerly Yugoslav users, the BBC broadcasts in a sublime quality of English and an inferior quality of Serbian, even giving way to neologisms and grammatical faux-pas. For Tamil users in Sri Lanka, the BBC’s Tamil service is subtle and sophisticated, yet the English-language broadcasts that Tamil listeners could share with Sinhala listeners sound, in comparison, low in terms of social stratification and negotiate with difficulty the accent differentiations between mainland Indian Tamil, northern Sri Lankan Tamil, and eastern Sri Lankan Tamil. To communicate across the vast Arabic-speaking world, by contrast, the BBC simply uses the standard modern literary Arabic accent, that is, precisely the stylized and stilted haw-haw accent that Arab users are sick and tired of in their ‘pan-Arab’ or nation-state news and even the World Service’s Arabic-language competitors. Transposing, so much is clear, is a technique intervening in translation, and all three contributions will touch on these seemingly intangible factors.

On transmitting, our last dimension of translation in the abstract, we also have astonishing news about the impartial BBC. It matters not only who get what when in the day, but also who get what at all. Bulic on ex-Yugoslavia discovers that the BBC reports a United Nations apology for an international insult that it had never reported; Thiranagama on Sri Lanka pursues the overlap, as well as the lack of it, among the BBC’s two language services aimed at Sri Lankans; and Jaber wonders why a public health catastrophe caused by the military
occupation, and then brutal siege, of the Gaza Strip was transmitted on the World Service in English, but not on the World Service in Arabic.

**Cutting Across the Four Transformations: Audiences and Subjectivities**

In keeping with our heuristic theoretical triangle outlined early on, we can now spend some last comparative thoughts on the audiences and their subjectivities. The BBC World Service has long been a world champion in qualitative as well as quantitative audience research. This is an unlikely achievement in three ways: first, a state broadcaster is not hunted or haunted by this or that statistic of who ‘tuned in’ when and why; it is often expected to serve its owners’ geo-political diplomacy functions, to be sure, but unqualified number-crunching is of little use to its paymasters and their own stake in the World Service. Secondly, most of the audience research is out-sourced to independent polling firms which, however, are also commercial enterprises thinking of the next job before they have done their present assignment. Thirdly, the global voice BBC needs comparable data from incomparable regions. To this end, the World Service started with a matrix distinguishing different users to be targeted. The first version distinguished Cosmopolitans, Aspirants, and the Information-Poor, partly according to measures of individual status. Cosmopolitans were multipliers by social status and functions, aspirants were near-cosmopolitans with more limited multiplication potentials, and the information-poor had little measurable influence but needed the World Service at times and in places of acute crisis. This first matrix was replaced by a distinction of markets. Distinguishing markets instead of individuals made and makes sense because media consumption is always collective, be it directly (‘do you have a short-wave radio?’ among the displaced information-poor) or indirectly (‘Let me tell you what the BBC said’ among the aspirants). Even when media consumption is not immediately collective, human contact passes it on as a collectively shared and responsible repository or imaginary. The new classification was thus less individualistic, but more realistic for a world service, and not least for the BBC’s World Service that regularly has to juggle and re-assess its impact by public diplomacy or geo-political constellations. It therefore distinguished four markets: Crisis Markets, Life-Line Markets, News-Seekers’ Markets, and Influencers. A Crisis Market is where houses or huts are burning and BBC, sometimes on short-wave, is the only reference to confirmed facts. Life-Line Markets remain where an acute crisis has passed, but people hang on for their life chances to factual information that they can either trust or at least compare. The News Seekers’ segment is rather more detached from immediate pressing needs and
includes many multipliers such as teachers, nodal persons in greater social networks, and of course the intelligentsia of one of another language region. The latter can, so to speak, graduate into the top segment of Influencers, depending on the local circumstances as assessed by the intervening audience research contractors. We mention these terms and approaches governing audience research quite early on, since they will figure in various passages of the following empirical case studies, and we mention them also to pay tribute to the World Service’s path-breaking methodologies in articulating coverage by country, coverage by language, accessibility by geo-political need, and reception by users who multiply its messages and, may one say, its overarching message. Research on audiences, too, brings us closer to both the audiences’ subjectivities, as well as the World Service’s own, to understand better the seeming paradox which we outlined at the beginning. A final word on this BBC combination of state-funded broadcasting and a global aura of impartiality may be in order here. The World Service’s aura of impartiality does not often allow for direct and explicit commentary on the rights and wrongs of a situation. Yet reporting data without commentary is no reporting at all. So the BBC fills the gap with the most subtle skills of citation and quotation. Citation of direct speech and its transformation into indirect speech is, of course, a global standard of impartial reporting; the question is only whom one cites or quotes as bearing witness or counter-witness to a position one cannot take explicitly. Bulic’s paper is a case in point here, as in the case of the former Yugoslavia, the BBC is directly financed by one of the governments fighting to divide the spoils of war. He even traces ‘the alchemy of sounding impartial’ to the British broadcaster’s skills at ‘impartiality by ventriloquism’: it cites and quotes sources that it plainly thinks are talking nonsense (‘Washington insists that …’; the mainstream Serbian media report that …’). Other examples of such meta-discursive mastery also appear in Thiranagama’s analysis of the two services for Sri Lankans and Jaber’s location of the BBC Arabic-language service amid its many regional and global competitors. Seeing these deliberations, one may well think of Oscar Wilde’s adage that ‘the true artist creates the taste by which he is to be enjoyed.’ Yet the hallmarks of the BBC World Service’s aura and skills, remit and tricks, self-critical self-analysis and aesthetic mastery certainly transcend any self-validating hermeneutic circle. To understand its impact and consequences, both the intended and the unintended, one needs to focus on the empirics and even the seeming intangibles of its presence and its interventions.