

# Introduction

## Earthlings

‘We need a new subject for small talk. The weather has become too interesting.’  
(Chrostowska 2015: 158)

His brother, Wilhelm, believed that his mind was ‘made to connect ideas, detect chains of things’ (Wulf 2015: 87). When the German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt went exploring the Andes, a moss that grew there reminded him of a species from the forests of Northern Germany thousands of miles away. In the mountains near Caracas he found rhododendron-like plants that he compared to flowers he had seen in the Swiss Alps. In Mexico he came across pines, cypresses and oaks that were similar to those in Canada. In the words of his modern biographer, Andrea Wulf, Humboldt believed ‘Everything was connected’ (88). Connections brought about insights but they also spelled trouble. In Venezuela, for example, in the valley of Aruga at Lake Valencia, Humboldt noticed how once fertile land was being over-exploited and turning barren. The reason? Colour. The global demand for indigo led local people to grow the plant that produced the blue dye. The plant gradually replaced maize and other edible crops grown in the valley. Indigo plants were particularly demanding of the soil so that not only were local people depriving themselves of necessary food crops but the further cultivation of the plant would soon be impossible as a result of soil exhaustion. The dye on the European tablecloth had a long tail of ecological destruction that led to the other side of the Atlantic.

Translation is also ‘made to connect ideas’ and one of the ideas that has come to the fore in the contemporary world is that of climate change. As this book was being written, over 197 countries came together in Paris to discuss an agreement on limiting carbon dioxide emissions. Between 1990 when the first report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) alerted governments to the real threat of global warming and 2015 when the governments gathered in Paris, carbon dioxide emissions had not gone down. They had, in fact, risen by 60 per cent (Anderson 2015). What the global gathering demonstrated was the extent both of our interconnectedness and our vulnerability as a species. What we will argue in this book is that translation as a body of ideas and a set of practices is central to any serious or sustained attempt to think about this interconnectedness and vulnerability in the age of human-induced climate change.

## 2 Introduction

Over a decade ago I finished a volume on translation and globalisation with a brief consideration of ‘translation ecology’ (Cronin 2003: 165–172). My main concern was with the role of translation in giving minority language speakers control over what, when and how texts might be translated into or out of their languages. The notion of translation ecology was subsequently taken up by Chinese scholars who were particularly interested in how the science of ecology could be used to study the contexts and practices of translators (Xu 2009). This has led to regular symposia on the ‘eco-translatology’, where much focus is placed on ecosystemic notions of selection and adaptation (Liu 2011: 87–90). The approach that is adopted in this work is derived from a broad concept of political ecology understood as the study of the social, cultural, political and economic factors affecting the interaction of humans with other humans, other organisms and the physical environment (Robbins 2011). In taking the term ‘eco-translation’ first employed by Clive Scott at a lecture given in 2015 in the University of Exeter, I have extended it beyond Scott’s understanding of the term to describe the translator’s ‘psycho-physiological’ involvement with the text to be translated (Scott 2015). As used in the current work, ‘eco-translation’ covers all forms of translation thinking and practice that knowingly engage with the challenges of human-induced environmental change. One of the challenges, indeed, is how to apprehend the agents and objects of this change.

Timothy Morton has coined the term ‘hyperobjects’ to refer to ‘things that are massively distributed in space and time relative to humans’ (2013: 1). His examples of hyperobjects are various:

A hyperobject could be a black hole. A hyperobject could be the Lago Agrio oil field or the Florida Everglades. A hyperobject could be the biosphere, or the solar system. A hyperobject could be the sum total of all the nuclear materials on Earth; or just the plutonium, or the uranium. A hyperobject could be the very long-lasting product of direct human manufacture, such as Styrofoam or plastic bags, or the sum of all the whirring machinery of capitalism.

(1)

Another example of a hyperobject is global warming or climate change. The difficulty with hyperobjects is that humans will experience only part of the hyperobject at any one time and they are impossible usually to grasp in their totality. You could be aware of a series of unusually hot or unusually wet summers or have noted that a small piece of coastline you know well has changed since childhood but the notion of ‘global warming’ can seem excessively abstract or remote. If you throw away a Styrofoam cup how can you imagine what the world will be like in 400 years’ time, the time it will take to biologically degrade the cup? If you plug into an electricity network that is partially powered by nuclear energy, how aware are you that the amortisation rate for plutonium is around 24,000 years? As Morton observes, ‘Twenty-four thousand years into the future, no one will be meaningfully related to me. Yet everything will be influenced by

the tiniest decisions I make right now' (122). Hyperobjects change our experience of time. The future, in other words, is no longer in the future. It informs the here and now. When we think about the future of translation it involves inescapably the question of climate change which will leave no area of human and non-human being untouched. Translation studies as one of the human and social sciences cannot remain immune to the ecological shift in many humanities and social science subjects. It needs to take seriously the idea that translation and translators do not exist in isolation but that they are 'an inextricable and integral part of a larger physical and living world' (Stibbe 2015: 7). Food security, climate justice, biodiversity loss, water depletion, energy security, linguicide, eco-migration, resource conflicts, global monocultures, are only some of the issues that will be at the heart of environmental debates in the twenty-first century and that will need to be addressed by scholars and practitioners of translation alike. *Eco-Translation* is an attempt to think through some of the assumptions we make about translation and how they may need to be radically re-thought on a planet that, from a human standpoint, is entering the most critical phase of its existence.

Chapter one investigates the radically changed environmental circumstances of humanity and asks why this should be of concern to debates around language, culture and translation. It opens with an examination of the notion of the Anthropocene – the new geological era of human-induced climate change – and looks at the shift in the status of the human from biological to geological agent. This shift in status means that the history of the planet and the history of humanity begin to converge. The long standing division between the human and social sciences and the natural and physical sciences is no longer tenable in a world where we cannot remain indifferent to the more than human. From this new awareness comes a need for the development of a post-anthropocentric identity which naturally affects all human activities including translation. In placing the future of the planet at the centre of our preoccupations, rather than our all too human selves, the chapter introduces the notions of place, resilience and relatedness in the context of the formulation of a new political ecology of translation. These core notions are repeatedly explored throughout the book but in chapter one they provide a context for paying attention to the notion of attention itself. As translation battles for recognition in the increasingly crowded attentionscape of late modernity, how are we to think about what it means to be attended to and what might an 'ecology of attention' mean in terms of what translators do or aspire to do? One of the reasons for desiring the attention of others is to make work visible or have it valued. The difficulty in the contemporary moment is that the products of translation may be visible but not the process. Taking a key concept from social anthropology, the 'logic of inversion', the chapter looks at how the means needed to bring about a translation – human, social, cultural – are often sacrificed to the ends of immediacy, transparency and instantaneity. This tyranny of ends over means relates to the more general concealment of the earth's resources that have made human action possible. The result has been, for example, a long historical indifference to the forms of

#### 4 *Introduction*

energy – from human slaves to fossil fuels – which have allowed civilisations to emerge. Part of the task of ‘transitology’ – the science and art of managing the transition to more sustainable, resilient and viable economies and societies – is to take means seriously because it is they that determine how and in what direction our societies will travel. It is in this context that the chapter concludes by considering translation as a means, a form of energy that is potentially more amenable to the cyclical rationale of recycling than to the linear logic of extractivism, the logic based on a non-reciprocal, dominance-based relationship with the earth.

Chapter two explores in detail the ecological relationship between translation and one of the essential means of species survival, food. The production, distribution and consumption of food has, of course, become a core concern of political ecology, as how food is currently produced, distributed and consumed has enormous consequences in terms of carbon emissions. When we open our mouth, it is usually to eat or to speak or do both. Talking and eating or talking about eating are typically human activities. Humans, however, like the foods they eat, move about. If humans and foods travel in a multilingual world, then translation must be integral to that movement. The chapter considers how food features in representations of migration and how particularly forms of translation practice can work not so much to reveal as to conceal the paths of migration. The concealment of movement is equally at play in the tyranny of transitivity, the notion that translation, like cooking, is a matter of following preordained routines. The actual working through a translation like the preparation of a dish allows the unpredictable, the unplanned for to emerge and it is this excess of effect over intention that brings us to one of the paradoxes of food translation, the more a food is of a place, the more it can seemingly be displaced. The chapter examines the different ways in which we can attempt to capture the relationship between food and place in a way that acknowledges specificity and identity but embeds them in more ecologically attuned notions of connectedness. One of the pressures of food on place is, of course, demand. The more mouths there are, the more that need to be fed. The more mouths there are, however, the more that also want to speak and be understood. In the field of political economy, there is an increasing emphasis on the social consequences of the ‘second machine age’, the shift towards digitalised and automated forms of production that substitute for higher-level human cognitive activities. One of the activities targeted is precisely to do with the need to speak and be understood, translation. The chapter examines the logic of industrialised food production and aligns this with the ever-increasing demands for translation, more food, more words. If the practices of agro-industry were eventually called into question by the Slow Food movement is there an equivalent movement of resistance to the mass, industrialised production of translated language? Is there a need to develop something like a Slow Language movement? Is language a common good like the land, earth, air and water that has been constantly devalued because it is something that we all share and therefore is not valued? In the context of these questions, the chapter looks at how the description of food, the

consumption of food and the preparation of food as they are filtered through translation guide us towards a new translation ecology.

Chapter three looks at how translation figures in our relationship or lack of relationship with the numerous other species that inhabit the planet. Taking a critical look at human exceptionalism, the notion that humans are radically different from and immeasurably superior to other members of the animal kingdom, the chapter goes on to consider the symbolic nature of communication for both organic and inorganic entities in our world. The notion of ‘tradosphere’ is advanced to capture the different forms of translation implied by the multiple connections between the organic and the inorganic. In order to develop any sense of solidarity with other species in a period of unprecedented mass extinction of other species by humans, inter-species relatedness demands reflection on translation, how to communicate across difference. That this is a challenging task is illustrated by the complexity of different animal communication systems discussed in the chapter. The difficulty of the task, however, does not lessen the responsibility on students and scholars of translation to consider how they might use translation to move towards a post-anthropocentric relationship to the world, vital for any notion of ecological survival. In particular, the chapter investigates the rehabilitation of the animal subject through translation drawing on historical experiences of colonialism where translation in its more enlightened mode offered the possibility of a voice for the oppressed. The need to engage with difference should not mean the annihilation of difference and there is due regard for the dangers of anthropomorphism. Denying difference through the projection of human fantasies is examined in the context of the relationship between translation and the problematic of incommensurability. Dealing with the indeterminacy of meaning has long been a preoccupation of those who practise and study translation and due consideration is given to how this experience might guide us in dealing with inter-species communication. What results from the challenges of the Anthropocene is not only the necessity to engage at a very profound level with the animal world around us but the need to re-examine existing disciplinary tools and ask whether they are any longer fit for purpose. Translation studies as an interdiscipline is well placed to tackle a changing disciplinary environment once it is sufficiently self-reflexive about its own biases and assumptions. One of these assumptions relates to seeing its remit as dealing exclusively with human language. However, not only must this assumption be questioned but the chapter also asks us to consider whether entities other than life-forms need to be factored into a more comprehensive or enlarged understanding of what translation might mean or could do. Implicit in this line of thinking is the necessary humility of ‘earthlings’, the consciousness of beings who realise that they have only one planet and whose well-being is crucially dependent on the well-being and intelligibility of all the other entities for whom the earth is also home. The humility involves not only the crossing of borders in a move towards empathy and understanding but also a respect for borders in a drive towards respect and sustainability.

## 6 *Introduction*

Chapter four examines the position of technology and translation in an era of ecological vulnerability. A core argument of the chapter is that there is nothing virtual about the consequences of the virtual. Creating the immaterial worlds of informations and communications technology (ICT) leads to very real, material effects for the environment, in everything from the extraction of precious metals to the constant drain on energy resources. Technology as an indispensable component of contemporary translation practice is deeply implicated in forms of energy dependency that are increasingly unsustainable. Even when the emphasis is placed on energy efficiency, a paradoxical consequence is that the more energy that is saved, the more energy that is sought. In part, the insatiable logic of ICT development is driven by and drives an economic model of endless, material growth. Translation as a practice through localisation that is indispensable in the development of foreign markets for goods and services is closely bound up with an ideology of infinite growth. The chapter examines what are the future possibilities for translation technology in a world where this growth model is no longer sustainable. In particular, the chapter examines the potential for the move from a 'high-tech' to a 'low-tech' translation practice. Part of the motivation for this shift is not only the need to reconsider energy use and resource availability but also to re-examine the position of translators in situations where their labour is not valued or, more critically, remunerated. Any analysis of the contemporary technological moment must address the seemingly unquenchable desire for data accumulation that has very tangible environmental impacts. In the context of this desire, the question is asked whether it is ecologically responsible to pursue a model of endless translation growth. The chapter considers whether less may indeed be more, in particular in the case of the direction of translation. That is to say, a maximalist notion of translation productivity can favour the creation of monolingual monocultures that are deeply inimical to the viability of resilient and diverse knowledge spaces. How these spaces survive in an era of rapid technological development and increased ecological vulnerability is partly related to how knowledge itself is organised. The chapter looks at how alternative models of knowledge organisation impact on the relationship between translation and technology and other critical areas. In considering what kind of transition is necessary to avoid ecological collapse, there can be no gainsaying the fundamental importance of the tools that humans use. It is in the spirit of the re-evaluation of the role of technology in translation that the notion of translation as 'craft' is revived to suggest or explore potential futures for translators and their machines.

Chapter five analyses the role of literature, particularly travel writing, in teasing out the relationship between ecology, travel and translation. The chapter begins with the different representations of minority languages and speakers in contemporary travel accounts and concludes with an exploration of the translation consequences of 'minoritised' migrant languages. As travel writers move through different cultures, they also move within different language worlds and how these worlds are constructed partly depends on the language of narration. That is to say, the world can look like a very different place depending on

whether the traveller is the speaker of a global or a lesser-used or less-translated language. Global languages, however, embark on their own translation journeys and the chapter examines the impact of the hidden histories of language contact on a re-engagement with the surrounding world. Landscapes constantly suggest the convergence of the aesthetic and the ethical. It is indeed an ethical concern with the disappearance of landscapes for future generations of children that has animated much debate in contemporary ecology. In the chapter it is suggested that the languages of children themselves, the translation of the world into the multiple dialects of childhood, reveals the transformative energy of translation as a way of both paying close attention to and to transforming the world. If language difference is key to cultural diversity, how these differences and diversity are portrayed will have inevitable consequences for how an ecological sensitivity develops around language and translation. At the heart of this portrayal is a tension never fully resolved between the mobile traveller on the one hand and the immobile resident on the other. Travel accounts in a spirit of ecological open-mindedness may wish to celebrate language diversity but find that the value-system of a highly mobile modernity can result in highly reified and entropic versions of minority languages and cultures. The preference for culturalist rather than political explanations of difference and context mean that whole communities are moved outside the realm of time into the domain of ageless atavism. The issue becomes even more problematic when speakers of minority or minoritised languages find themselves not in picturesque peripheries but at the heart of the contemporary metropolises. Debates around language, translation and integration presuppose notions around 'integration' which are inappropriate, rigid and do not reflect the complex linguistic labour of globalisation from below, the constant language and translation contacts in the cafes, factory floors and markets of modern cities. Of course, if a core value of ecosophy is to make humans alive to the sheer diversity of the living and the non-living, humans need to know how this diversity has been described. Translation is essential to this disclosure of the world. We need to know what people have said about ecosystems before we can respond appropriately. The chapter explores a number of the ethical dilemmas that result from this and the complicated relationship minority languages and indigenous peoples can have with the translation imperative. The age of the Anthropocene is of necessity a Translation Age as it requires all the skills translators can muster to restore a degree of intelligibility to our deeply damaged ecosystems.

Alexander von Humboldt first warned of the environmental consequences of deforestation in French. When the German translator came to put the German's French words into German he felt that he could not let the author's remarks on deforestation go unchallenged. He added a footnote of his own claiming that Humboldt's claims about the harmful effects of deforestation were 'questionable' (Wulf 2015: 213). If the great German naturalist had to put up with translators as climate sceptics, the challenge now is to bring translation to the heart of the dialogue about the future of our shared planet. Any other response would indeed be 'questionable'.