

The Technology Panel (Friday, October 26, 2007)

It's always hard to blog the panel you're on but I have nonetheless tried. We sat in a spacious lecture hall of the Irvine IT engineering faculty. The group had shrunken to 40 participants but the level of the presentation remained high.

Session VIII of the [Global Conversations](#) conference in Irvine presented a contemporary blend of possibilities and limits of new media as a democratic empowerment tools and was chaired by Barbara Cohen. Elman Gheytanchi from Iran, now living in L.A. spoke about the variety of Iranian blogs, both inside and outside the country. She presented a nuanced picture in which the question if Iranian bloggers, currently seen as freedom fighters are already politically co-opted. Beside the amazing blog culture there are also the YouTube videos of 'infidel' women being beaten up on the streets. Iranian bloggers are still censored and have to come up with creative ideas how to change their IP addresses, where to reappear in the blogosphere and how to redress their mask-and still be recognizable. At the end of her presentation Elman Gheytanchi showed the [Zolf bar baad YouTube clip](#) from the Iranian dissident underground singer-songwriter [Mohsen Namjoo](#), now living in Amsterdam.

Susan Harris started her presentation of the [Words Without Borders](#) website with depressing statistics about the inequality between translation to and from English. Less than 1% of US-American publication are translations of more or less literary material (the definition of literature has even been stretched here). In response to growing cultural isolation the Words Without Borders was founded. Its first monthly edition came online in August 2003 and since then the database has been filled with around 700 unique contributions. Words Without Borders has also produced book anthologies (such as one on literature from the 'Axis of Evil') and already played a role in a number of book deals.

Tom Keenan gave an update of his ungoing research into the online world of Jihad videos. This is not a world of bloggers that create a presence on YouTube, MySpace and Facebook. A key role here is played by web forum software as developed in the mid-late nineties, multi-threaded, polyglot conversations in a multitude of major languages that one has to get familiar with in order to find your way. Within the forum image links are traded (comparable to the Japanese Otaku culture), links to the latest video of Osama Bin Laden, pdfs of speeches and pointers to audio archives of

sermons, delivered by remote and largely unknown Imans. There is nothing marginal here. There are no barriers in terms of digital divide. Tom Keenan noted that we should consider this an “authentic public space”, much in spirit of earlier expectations of ‘global civil society’ and international NGOs, with the only difference that these informal exchanges should be seen as part of an anti-political, deeply anti-democratic project.

In my presentation I started off with my blog theory and raised the question how a quest of general theory could be complemented with culturally specific data and concepts from specific language regions. Blogs have established web cultures in languages outside English in a way that has not yet been properly thought through. AtGlobal Conversations you got a clear sense that, from the perspective of ‘marginal languages’, the Internet is still a revolutionary tool, full of unexploited potentials. However, critical theory has moved on and is now exploring ‘techno-populism’. As Tom Keenan also mentioned, there are user cultures that operate beyond Good and Evil and are out there, in the Big World, utilizing easy to use software and protocols irrespective of the intentions of the libertarian geeks, early adapter circles, ‘civil society’ or post-dotcom entrepreneurs.

As examples I used three distinctive blog cultures: the shocklogs in the Netherlands (see the postings on the [Masters of Media blog](#)), the debate around the presumed German reluctance to start blogging (see my previous ZKM posting [here](#)) and the emerging Hindi blog culture in India, a research that Ravikant presented at the [Pedagogical Faullines](#) workshop in Amsterdam on September 22 2007.

The Closing Panel

Satochi Ukai, who perhaps refused to travel to the USA as a tourist, and had to acquire a visa to enter, and whose case was upheld by the U.S. embassy in Tokyo as being serious, could not attend the conference. Instead, Gayatri Spivak read his text. In it, Ukai talks about the survival of Korean and Okinawa languages during colonial domination of the Japanese state. Ainu language in Hokkaido has been even more so marginalized. These are so-called languages without writing, which is questionable if we follow Jacques Derrida’s *On Grammatology* (by now the hall has filled up with audience). This is why the aboriginal people feel more comfortable with the digital (online) realm because of its soft fusion of narration/writing and the oral tradition.

Achille Mbembe, author of *On the Postcolony*, referred to earlier remarks on the relation between language and freedom. In the past it was an act of resistance to appropriate the language of the colonizer and to target it against itself. That strategy is no longer working. The South-African constitution now recognizes 11 official languages. India has 24 (says Spivak). There are 'linguistic human rights' (think of the Kurds). Remember that the 1976 in Soweto started around the issue of language regimes, in this case Afrikaans. How do we share? What is common and what is not? Deweaponize is necessary. The power of enfranchise is what we need. Can theoretical qualities of one language be translated into another. What is needed is the accumulation of linguistic or expressive capital. Mbembe lived for four years in Dakar where urban [Wolof](#) is used to grow linguistic capital of its speakers.

Gayatri Spivak started with complaining about the World Social Forum, not being an instrument for change. She would not tell stories about her own, so she promised. "I could get up and sing but I won't do that this time." There is a language we learn first. That's the Mother Tongue. When we learn a language we try to access its deep archive. No just world is coming from the North. This is why we look into the dialog between languages beyond the situation of a small group of migrants in European cities (referring here to Balibar).

We have to think of translation as an active practice. It is not something you learn and then apply. We should break through the custom that the North brings in theory and the Global South experience. However, wonderful the experience is of presenting a poem in our Mother Language, this fact alone will not change the world.

Some closing remarks: code switching could be a good tactic to make differences visible. Hybridity is the strategy of the in-between people, for example the urban Africans. Who can make the cross-links? We do not have to speak in tongues. It is enough to recognize the creolization or lexicalization that is happening around us. To mix three language is a sign of competence. Emerging creols are particular language mixes that can be used-and dropped. What needs to be recognized is multilingualism as a lived reality of the billions, a basic right, virtue -and strategy.