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Reviewing directionality in writing and translation: Notes for a history of translation in the Horn of Africa

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Bringing together history and the study of translation, this article focuses on Christian missionary activities in Eritrea and Ethiopia, with special reference to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It presents and discusses their impact on the shaping and reshaping of cultures and identities in a dynamic interrelation with the African agenda. Though focusing on relatively recent events, this article also takes into account the traditions of evangelization and translation that populated the cultural and religious landscape of the region over a timespan of more than 16 centuries. Focusing on orally transmitted knowledge, written documents, the advent of printing in the area, and all the other activities which have made the dissemination of the missionaries' Christianity possible, this article aims to overcome the common assumption that colonialism stands as an absolute historical divide, and to suggest a revision of the notion of directionality typically applied to the observation of translation phenomena in Africa and other colonial contexts, whereby horizontality is associated with *before* and verticality with *after* the colonial period. Reflecting upon instances of multidirectional writing and translation processes from a historical perspective, with special reference to Christian missionary activities in the Horn of Africa, the ultimate aim of this article is to highlight the importance of interdisciplinary research and its great potential in casting light over events and practices which are still largely unexplored.

Keywords: translation; directionality; colonialism; missionaries; Eritrea; Ethiopia

Although translation studies has had a relatively short life, since its official debut in the 1970s (Holmes 1972), the history of translation and translations is as old as human communication itself. And although the work of translators has been generally shrouded in invisibility,

[they] have been instrumental agents in the advancement of culture throughout history The function of these "unassuming artisans of communication" has included such far-reaching and transformative roles as inventing alphabets, enriching languages, encouraging the emergence of national literatures, disseminating technical and scientific knowledge, propagating religions and writing dictionaries. (Brodzki 2007, 16)

History, for its part, has been the object of discussion and investigation since the beginning of time, certainly with frequent reference to texts, translators and

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translations, just as translation studies has relied on historically relevant events and explanations for its development. The interdependence of the two areas of study can be traced in the writings of many scholars. Within translation studies, for instance, Stephen Quirke (2006, 270), mainly with reference to ancient Egypt, remarks that “translation or transfer marks the start of five millennia of history”. In his many articles on the history of translation and interpretation in Africa, Cameroonian scholar Charles Atangana Nama refers to the need for a true interplay between the two disciplinary approaches; he goes as far as suggesting that “it would be interesting, particularly for a student of ancient African history, to coordinate a research team with a contemporary scholar of translation, to trace the kinds of translation and interpretation patterns which took place in precolonial times” (1993, 415).

Although mutually essential, the disciplines have hardly ever come together in systematic investigations, and, perhaps more significantly, the studies that have been carried out have so far enjoyed limited circulation. Wishing to adopt a truly interdisciplinary approach in this study, we shall employ sources and resources from both history and translation studies in an effort to merge them, thus creating a thorough observation of phenomena which are, in fact, impossible to separate on either of the two disciplinary fronts.

Such an approach spells out the need to adopt a broad and flexible definition of translation, where writing, transmitting, codifying, interpreting and retelling (Inggs and Meintjes 2009) all have a place. As Brodzki puts it, especially with reference to colonial settings, their pre- and post-included acts of translation are “processes of intergenerational and intercultural transmission” (2007, 14); that is, instruments of historical consciousness that cannot be levelled out by reductionist postcolonial frameworks. With reference to the African continent, one of the few volumes currently available on translation in Africa, *Translation Studies in Africa* (Inggs and Meintjes 2009) contains creative and broad definitions of translations by all its contributors, be they scholars, writers or translators (Di Giovanni 2013). Atangana Nama (1993) had already argued in favour of a broader definition of the term “translation” with reference to Africa, calling, among other things, for the study of phenomena of “transmutation” (414). In this article, translation will be discussed precisely in these terms, with orality, its transmission and its relation to literacy playing a crucial role throughout.

This article will, therefore, follow the long path of *interlinguistic* and *intercultural* exchanges in the Horn of Africa before, during and after colonization, bringing together history and the study of translations and referring to translation broadly speaking, with a view to painting a larger picture of all these activities and gauging their impact on the shaping and reshaping of cultures, identities and social relations. Moreover, our aim is also to enrich current theories of translation in Africa, first and foremost by acknowledging Africa’s great diversity and highlighting its agency, generally overlooked since the colonial period.

Why the Horn of Africa?

The Horn of Africa, more specifically the territory corresponding to today’s Eritrea and Ethiopia, stands out as an interesting case. This area had seen the flourishing of a host of oral but especially written traditions well before the advent of colonization.

The Horn, which has always been characterized by the presence of a written language for intra- and intercultural communication, had established a complex network of interactions with other African, Asian and European languages for almost two millennia, with Sabeian, Greek, Ge'ez and Amharic in turn constituting the status of the most powerful written languages. Besides these, the presence and role of Arabic as a written vehicle for Islamic culture in the Horn as well as the whole of Africa should not be underestimated, as evidenced by hundreds of thousands of Arabic manuscripts still available to the scholarly community (Gori 2007; Ahmed 2009).

Although the first evidence of a standardized use of Ge'ez can be traced back to the second century AD, it only later developed as a fully fledged language for political and religious purposes. In fact, until the fourth century the dominant diplomatic and commercial language was Greek, as is proven by many archaeological remains (Avanzini 2005). Scholars agree that Ge'ez developed as a literary language from between the fifth and seventh centuries AD and connect this with Christianity's introduction into the region, which occurred in the fourth century. Thus, the development of Ge'ez language and literature can also be seen as the result of intense translation processes, mainly effected for religious purposes.

The translation into Ge'ez of various literary works from Greek and Arabic, for example, is attested from the fourth century BC. Needless to say, translation of the Holy Bible into Ge'ez constitutes the bulk of these activities, offering many interesting elements for linguistic as well as theological debate. It is also worth noting that these translation processes involved many books which are not part of the biblical tradition in Western Christianity and that, to date, the oldest sources for many crucial documents on the history of Western and Eastern Christianity are mainly available in Ge'ez translations (Bausi 2008). Moreover, as has been recently pointed out by Alessandro Bausi, these translation processes were not linear and involved the interaction and merging of different textual materials. As Bausi (2014, 18) states, by way of example, "Mediaeval Ethiopian scribes, much like their European brethren, used multiple textual sources (referred to as 'contamination')."

From the twelfth century, major political turmoil led to a shift in the centre of power from the areas where the Ge'ez civilization and culture had originally developed towards the South, namely towards areas where Amharic was the dominant language. Therefore, at least until the sixteenth century, there was a regime of linguistic dualism whereby Ge'ez was still the language of education, literacy and religion, whereas Amharic gained ground as the language spoken by most subjects of the empire – a sort of *lingua franca* confined to the domain of orality and flanked by a host of exclusively oral languages.

The hierarchical relationship among local languages in the region was also deeply influenced by translation processes. For instance, Amharic reached the status of a fully fledged written language around the seventeenth century, mainly as a reaction to Portuguese missionary encroachment. The Portuguese had landed on the African shores of the Red Sea in 1541 with the aim of joining forces with the Abyssinian Empire and containing the Ottoman presence in the Red Sea Region. Portuguese forces were soon followed by Jesuit missionaries, who launched an intense proselytizing campaign aimed at converting local Orthodox Christians to Catholicism. Translation of Ge'ez literature into Latin and dissemination of Catholic theological notions were the cornerstones of Jesuit activities in the region.

To counter the challenge to its spiritual hegemony, the Orthodox Church took a decisive step and started using Amharic to write its religious texts for catechism (Cerulli 1968). In fact, although Ge'ez remained the official language at court and was used until the nineteenth century for various religious and secular literary genres (hagiographies, royal chronicles and poetry), around the tenth century it gradually stopped being spoken and understood by the largely illiterate majority of the population. The Orthodox Church, therefore, started to translate the basic tenets of its theological thought into Amharic, freeing them from the elitist rarefactions of Ge'ez. After this, written Amharic was intensively used for religious teaching, which led to the development of a new literary genre. The so-called *andemta* (Cowley 1974) – that is, biblical commentaries – became increasingly diffused as a translation of the translation: they paraphrased and explained the Bible in Amharic based on the Ge'ez translation.

As a result, hierarchical relations among languages in the region were based on the predominance of Ge'ez and Amharic as written languages, while the others remained long confined to the domain of orality. Eventually, the nineteenth century was to mark the advent of Amharic as the dominant language used for both political and religious purposes, and also the slow development of written traditions for other languages.

Translation studies and Africa

The coexistence and reciprocal influence of so many languages across the vast continent of Africa has led to the multiplication of activities relating to translation in the broad sense defined above. Interlingual transfer processes within Africa as a whole and specific regions have often involved interaction between orality and literacy, in different ways. This may be one of the reasons why little attention has so far been devoted to the study of African translation practices in Western academia. Thus, the difficulties of mapping often uncodified processes of transfer, between languages themselves uncodified, has been a thorny issue for researchers.

Even today, the wealth of interlingual activities throughout Africa is inversely proportional to the attention they have received by translation studies scholars. In Europe and North America, the number of volumes devoted to the exploration of issues of translation pertaining to the African continent can be counted on one hand, while contributions by African scholars in Africa have only occasionally reached continental or even national borders. There have been, of course, several exceptions, as in the work of scholars from Cameroon (University of Buea) and South Africa. The latter has seen the flourishing of undergraduate and postgraduate translation courses at several universities, matched by intense research activities.¹ And yet, by and large, Africa still constitutes unexplored territory in terms of translation research, encouraging an overall tendency to consider it in monolithic terms. Among the aims of this article is the desire to counter such an attitude, highlighting not only Africa's great diversity from a historico-translational point of view, but also its agency in terms of interlingual and intercultural communication processes, which is often overlooked in studies born out of postcolonialism.

There is a growing body of writings from African diasporic intellectuals and thinkers concerning African literature, philosophy and cultural studies. Although imbued by postcolonial hybridity and sometimes personal/cultural bitterness, their

contribution to enlivening the international debate is undeniable, as is the revival of African folklore which occasionally emerges as part of their work. The connections between orality and literacy, the role of translators (missionaries, informants, writers, ethnographers, intellectuals, all included) and the interactions between languages and cultures within and across the Horn of Africa will be discussed from a historical perspective in the next sections. More specifically, our analysis will proceed by referring to, and redefining, writing as translation and directionality.

Writing as translation

Valuable and varied contributions to the study of translation in Africa have been made by Paul Bandia (2008) in numerous essays as well as in the book *Translation as Reparation*. A key notion for Bandia (2006, 2008, 2009) is that of writing as translation in Africa. Referring almost exclusively to the postcolonial period and not specifically to any region or country, Bandia attaches a twofold meaning to this concept.

In his 2009 chapter in *Translation Studies in Africa*, Bandia says: “there is no doubt that translation has played an important role in ensuring communication and exchanges between the numerous linguistic and ethnocultural groups on the African continent”, adding that “given the continent’s vast oral traditions and the many non-alphabetized languages, the writing of these cultures can be viewed in terms of translation” (2009, 2). In this first definition, Bandia concentrates on written codification – that is, the textualization of orally transmitted languages, traditions and folklore on the part of missionaries, ethnographers and colonizers – while also referring to contacts between local cultures. His second definition of writing as translation concerns the writing of African euphone literature by African-born authors; that is, their transfer of values, ideas, traditions and attitudes originating in African contexts through a European language.

For his first definition, he draws inspiration from the long tradition of ethnographers, whose efforts were often, and are still, seen as translations. As John Sturrock (2010) observes in his essay “Writing Between the Lines: The Language of Translation”, the work of ethnographers often revealed multiple writing-as-translation processes with the language of the indigenous people, which, being codified in writing, were subject to investigation. This occasionally led to spontaneous writing that was then translated into other languages. Sturrock cites the linguist/ethnographer Bronislaw Malinowski:

We shall have in the first place to produce the texts, phrases, terminologies and formulae in native. Then we shall have to face the task of translating them. A word for word rendering is necessary to give a certain direct feeling of the language, which a free translation can in no way replace. But the literal translation is not sufficient. (1935, 10–11)

Through Malinowski’s words, Sturrock highlights the multifarious and important translational work carried out by ethnographers. As Bandia (2009) also points out, they were essential for the codification of languages and cultures, although, as we shall see, they did not play a major role in the Horn of Africa as in other regions. Moreover, the first, systematic ethno-linguistic efforts are to be ascribed to the missionaries, the forerunners of recognized ethnographers and ethnography-as-translation.

Returning to Bandia's twofold definition and more specifically to its second part, the writing of europhone literature in Africa, or by African-born diasporic writers, undeniably implies multiple translation processes. Moreover, this activity has been constantly on the increase, taking up new forms and meanings, unforeseeable nuances and increasing visibility worldwide. A large number of African-born writers could be quoted here, writers who have more or less struggled with the acceptance of the use of English, French or other European languages as tools for cultural translation.

With reference to English, amongst those writers and intellectuals who have discussed their use of European languages, we have the contrasting attitudes of Nigerian-born Chinua Achebe and Kenyan Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. Achebe, who passed away in 2013, wrote repeatedly about his use of, and relationship with, English. If we refer to Schmieđ's (1991, 121) classification of the attitudes of non-European, postcolonial writers using European languages in their work, he may be classed among the so-called "adaptionists" – that is, those who accept English in Africa as a historical fact and consider it as a tool in their own hands. Achebe's attitude is aptly summarized as follows:

Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else's? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling. But for me there is no other choice. I have been given the language and I intend to use it. (1975, 55)

Perhaps the use of the word "adaptionist" is reductive. Achebe does not simply "adapt" to English, but actively seizes the language and makes it a tool for expression, for the sharing of experiences and feelings, bending it to his own expressive needs. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, on the other hand, has frequently expressed his rejection of colonial/imperial languages, advocating a revival of African languages for all forms of expression. However, he has often written in English – he lives and works in an English-speaking country – which he uses for the purpose of a close, almost literal translation of his African culture and language:

As a writer who believes in the utilization of African ideas, African philosophy and African folklore and imagery to the fullest extent possible, I am of the opinion the only way to use them effectively is to translate them almost literally from the African language native to the writer to whatever European language he is using as a medium. (1986, 8)

In addition, and perhaps more interestingly for our purposes, wa Thiong'o has recently dedicated several works to the appreciation of orality:

There's a tendency to assume that knowledge, education, jurisprudence, and especially philosophy, come from the pen. This is because knowledge, the world over, reaches us through books.... Words don't come out of our mouths in written form; they come out as voice, spoken. The pen imitates the tongue. The pen is clerk to the tongue. It draws pictures of the spoken. The pen speaks the already spoken. (2013, 159–160)

In this vivid apology for orality, we can identify his wish to bring to light and revive the origins, and the richness, of African languages and cultures. He aims to promote

their appreciation and study in an era in which colonialism and its aftermath seem to outshine any other aspect and period.

To sum up, the twofold definition offered by Bandia points to the enormous complexity of cross-lingual and cross-cultural interactions in Africa during and after colonization. This has been confirmed by the brief reference to the postcolonial anglophone writers Achebe and wa Thiong'o, whose attitudes hint at a very dynamic and complex domain, where translation processes are as frequent as they are diluted. However, there seems to be an overall tendency to see writing as translation largely as a vertical process, where the European ethnographers first, then writers and translators – and their languages – are always at the top of the axis. The next section aims to provide a wide spectrum of examples of writing as translation in the Horn of Africa, where verticality appears in complex forms and is far from being the exclusive structure that can be identified in translational processes.

Writing as translation in the Horn

In the Horn of Africa, the work of ethnographers-as-translators has always been marginal, overruled by the presence and influence of linguists, mainly belonging to the tradition of oriental studies. A special focus on the Christian Orient has been developed over the decades, this declination of the term “orientalism” having little in common with the more recent, Saidian-inspired approach.

As mentioned earlier, this region had already developed its own alphabet and its own written tradition by the fourth century AD. The language used at that time at court in town states such as Aksum, Adulis and Yeha was Ge'ez, which belongs to the South-Semitic branch of the Afroasiatic family like other languages still spoken in the Horn – Argobba, Gurage, Harari, Tigre and Tigrinya, for instance (Voigt 2005). Accordingly, Western scholars interested in the Horn of Africa could connect to the cultures of the region through the rich and long-established scholarly tradition of Semitic studies with its wealth of glottological, philological, palaeographic and comparative research. This led to the use of disciplinary tools that were not rooted in the conventional ethnographic method used in colonial Africa, but that echoed orientalist discourses. We would even go so far as to suggest that orientalist discourses were actually preceded by “Ethiopicist” experiences.

By way of example, consider the keen interest in Ge'ez and Amharic languages by German scholar Hiob Ludolph as early as the seventeenth century, when he came in contact with pilgrims from the Horn of Africa who travelled to Rome. Seminal works such as the *Grammatica Aethiopica* (Ludolph 1661, [1699] 1702), *Historia Aethiopica* (Ludolph 1681), *Grammatica Linguae Amharicae* (Ludolph 1698a, 1698b), *Lexicon Amharico-latinum* (Ludolph 1698) and *Lexicon Aethiopico-latinum* (Ludolph 1699) all resulted from this experience. Ludolph's work has since represented a crucial, authoritative source for Western scholars interested in the Horn and constitutes evidence for the dialectic, horizontal nature of the exchange between European and African cultures in pre-colonial contexts. A crucial role in the development of Ludolph's linguistic and historical expertise in the region was played by S. Stefano Maggiore, a church in Rome that has received Ethiopian pilgrims since the fourteenth century (Leonessa 1929). Pilgrimage was instrumental in connecting Ethiopian Christianity with other Eastern and European forms, a custom that can be traced back to the tenth century. Pilgrims who originally ventured only to Jerusalem's

holy sites began to opt for much longer itineraries, particularly to Rome (Cerulli, 1943–47).

In this regard, pilgrimage can be considered not only as a spiritual experience, but also as a process of exposure to, and translation of, cultures. Abba² Tesfatsion Malhaso, an Ethiopian priest who arrived in Rome at the beginning of the sixteenth century, was an exemplary pilgrim in this sense. A close friend of Pope Marcellus II and Pope Paul III, and trusted advisor to Ignatius Loyola, Abba Tesfatsion was instrumental in shaping the European vision of Ethiopian culture and politics. Moreover, impressed by the huge potential of the printing press, he designed the Ge'ez fonts that were used to print and publish the Ethiopian version of the New Testament. He also promoted the translation and publication of the Ethiopian liturgical canon in Latin. These texts reached the court at the Vatican and made a strong impression on Pope Paul III, to the extent that he sent copies of these books as presents to the major European royal courts of the day (Lefevre, 1969–70). With reference to the colonial context, the orientalist influence that partly shaped the encounter between Europe and the Horn of Africa also helps to explain why the overall majority of colonial (and not only colonial) scholars then active in the region had a background in Semitic and Oriental studies, and many were the product of the prestigious and still existing Istituto Universitario Orientale (originally established as “Collegio dei Cinesi” in the eighteenth century) in Naples.

To conclude, the considerable emphasis placed on the written traditions of the region and the consequent development of orientalist narratives point to yet another instance of verticality. Colonial scholars have tended to pay less attention to cultures and languages that did not have a written tradition, thus reinforcing internal verticality from powerful, written languages down to the unwritten but widely spoken local languages.

Directionality

This leads us naturally to the second of the two concepts expressed in translation studies with reference to Africa. Although not explicitly referred to as “directionality”, this term appropriately sums up the issue raised by several scholars, in and outside translation studies, referring to the directions taken by the interlingual processes of textual and cultural transfer in Africa, before and after colonization. According to Bandia, directionality is expressed through the concepts of verticality and horizontality, the latter belonging to the pre-colonial period, and the former characterizing translation, and writing-as-translation processes, during and after colonization. As he writes:

European colonization added another dimension to the vibrant intercultural activity on the African continent. In addition to the horizontal translation and intercultural activity among Africans themselves, and to some extent including the Arabic tradition, there was now a vertical translation practice, based on unequal power relations, between European and African language cultures. In this vertical relationship, translation became much more than a mere exchange of cultures or texts, and assumed an ideological basis which determined and influenced the orientation of translation in the recording and transcription of African oral culture in European languages, as well as in the conveyance of Western civilization in African society. (2009, 5)

Although referring to the “vibrant intercultural activity” characterizing the African continent before colonization, Bandia locates it, with its complexity and vibrancy, along a horizontal axis, thus suggesting that the pre-colonial period was generally characterized by egalitarian linguistic and cultural exchanges. On the other hand, as has been argued above, virtually all the complex processes of writing as translation that occurred during and after the arrival of the colonizers are seen as vertical, with European languages and cultures always occupying the top position. Thus, directionality seems to have been largely reduced to a perpendicular axis, so that it seems to be reductive even when viewed purely in light of the examples of interlingual and intercultural exchanges so far presented, and solely with reference to the Horn of Africa.

In our view, directionality in translation processes in Africa, and more specifically in the Horn, has to be seen in more complex terms that not only imply the possibility of *reversed* directionality, but must also cater for countless other relations and connections, intermediaries on the perpendicular axis, stretching beyond it, and often not even represented as straight lines.

As far back as 1993, Atangana Nama, advocating a thorough study of translation in Africa, spelled out some of the reasons for the development of mainly perpendicular approaches to the observation of translation processes. Stating that such a thorough study is not only ambitious, but virtually impossible if not developed “country by country” (1993, 414), he goes on to remind his readers that much more has been written since the advent of colonialism and that, unfortunately, what remains in written form tends to be seen as testimony to the past much more than the unwritten. In short, he seems to support the idea that translational interactions have come to be discussed much more with the arrival of the Europeans and their languages, and that the body of writings produced during and after colonization is relatively easier to obtain and study than precolonial writings. Secondly, Atangana Nama says that “the myth that translation and interpretation in Africa began with the advent of imperialism seems to have been embraced and concretized even in intellectual circles” (*ibid.*), suggesting that, even in Africa, the strength of Western-driven, postcolonial perspectives has sunk in, somehow levelling out the study of these and other phenomena and fuelling a certain disregard for pre-colonial, African history. In our opinion, if the concept of translation is to be expanded when looking at African interlingual and intercultural activities, by the same token the research horizon must be broadened, pushed well beyond colonization and observed in all its complexity, which has to be represented more like an array of straight and curved lines than as a perpendicular axis. The next section provides further evidence of the rich and complex directionality of interlingual and intercultural processes within the Horn of Africa, also highlighting the fact that, even during colonization, the colonizers’ language and culture did not often play a dominant role.

The Horn of Africa: Directionality revisited

Verticality and horizontality in translation processes had been seen in the Horn of Africa well before colonization, taking on a multitude of different forms. In terms of horizontality, beyond the overall pattern identified by Bandia, we might recall the translations of texts from Latin into Ge’ez and from Ge’ez into Latin that were carried out by the Portuguese Jesuits during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Although these translation activities were mainly instrumental to the religious community to resolve internal conflicts (Pennec 2003), they nonetheless contributed to the dissemination of religious and linguistic traditions in the region. We have already pointed out concerning verticality that the hegemonic role firstly of Ge'ez, and later Amharic, had a strong influence on the other African languages spoken in the region, which were long confined to ordinary domestic spheres. Furthermore, these other African languages were codified largely in the colonial period, proving that the strong, vertical pressure from Ge'ez and Amharic on these languages came to be reviewed and progressively subverted with the influence of colonialism, but not necessarily with the intervention of the colonizers' language and culture.

When discussing directionality in the Horn, we cannot avoid referring to the religious sphere. If Ge'ez and Amharic have been essential for the spreading and support of Christianity (Tamrat 1972; Crummey 2000), which was dominant in the region, Islam was also widespread as a result of centuries-long contacts with the Muslim world (Gori 2006). The strong identification of Ge'ez and Amharic as languages of Christian power has, for a long time, led Muslim communities, particularly those where Amharic was not their mother tongue, to try and overcome this regime of verticality by resorting to Arabic. In fact, the common feeling was that the overwhelming predominance of Ge'ez and Amharic with their wealth of written texts could not be countered with languages that still did not enjoy the status of written languages and that, even when they did, could not compete fairly. Therefore, for these Muslim communities, Arabic was perceived as the only successful alternative, also by virtue of its prestigious written tradition, which was richer and more widespread than that of Ge'ez and Amharic.

Interestingly enough, this centuries-long overlap of religious and linguistic identities was increasingly subverted from the end of the nineteenth century, when scholars noticed a new pattern of Muslim proselytism that resorted to Amharic instead of Arabic (Cerulli 1926). This dramatic change in attitude has been explained as the result of the development of Amharic as a lingua franca well beyond its original boundaries, and therefore much more useful to illiterate audiences for whom Arabic was unintelligible (Drewes 2007).

Western modernity³ in the Horn was characterized by the preservation of age-old verticality as well as by the introduction of new forms of directionality. With reference to missionaries and colonial authorities, let us recall here that, in their official communications, they complied with pre-existing vertical relationships by using Amharic and Arabic rather than their own languages. However, this also implied introducing a new, somewhat paradoxical form of horizontality: by using Amharic and later Tigrinya for official correspondence, the colonizers put their own language – that is, Italian – on the same level as those languages, acknowledging their usefulness. There is ample evidence (Chelati Dirar, Gori, and Taddia 1997) of the use of local languages even well past the colonial occupation, at a time when one would have expected the implementation of Italian as the language of power and official communication.

On another front, the intensive normative activity carried out by first missionaries, and then colonial authorities, dramatically reshaped the region's linguistic landscape. This process started from the early nineteenth century, with the leading role of Protestant missionaries, particularly from the Swedish Evangelical Mission (Evangeliska-Fosterlands Stiftelsen), and resulted in the production of grammars,

manuals and the translation of religious material including the Bible. In this process, besides Amharic – with its first translation of the Bible, previously accessible only in Ge'ez – other languages spoken in the Horn moved from the oral to the written world. This was the case with Tigrinya and Tigre, both languages belonging to the Afro-Semitic tradition just as Kunama and Oromo belonged to the Nilo-Saharan and Cushitic families respectively. However, writing grammars and translating religious and pedagogical material was not a neutral intervention. First of all, missionaries wrote grammars and translated texts into one of the many varieties of the local language, normally that used in the area where they were based. By so doing, they also introduced verticality within the same language, giving prominence to one variety over the others. Moreover, the linguistic activities carried out by missionaries altered inherited relations of verticality among the local languages, which also implied a challenge to linguistic and political identities. It is interesting to note here that, in some cases, local communities were not enthusiastic about the introduction of new relations of horizontality among their languages. For centuries, only certain languages had been deemed appropriate to convey religious messages, for instance, whereas others were perceived as suitable only for mundane and more trivial purposes. As pointed out by the Swedish historian Gustaf Arén, with reference to the debate on the translation of the Bible into Tigrinya, many of the Eritrean priests as well as informants and assistants of the Swedish Mission “protested that Tigrinya was devoid of theological concepts and thereby unfit for religious use; Amarinya was by far to be preferred as a vehicle of spiritual truth” (Arén 1978, 332).

On the colonial front, an interesting example comes from Eritrea. Alongside the introduction of Italian for teaching in colonial/missionary schools, the colonial administration deliberately pushed for the strengthening of Tigrinya as a local language so as to counter the influence of Imperial Ethiopia through its lingua franca, Amharic. Martino Mario Moreno, one of the most important Italian scholars and colonial administrators, states:

In old Eritrea the largest part of the Christian population speaks Tigrinya. When we occupied the country, this language was hardly ever found in written form, due to the overall illiteracy as well as to the dominant role played by the official language of the rulers: Amharic. Italy has drawn it out of the shadows, teaching how to read and write it. The Franciscan Catholic Mission, which runs a large number of schools, has collaborated with the Government by publishing a large number of schoolbooks and religious texts that have aroused passion among many readers. (Moreno 1939, 35, our translation)

All these examples and reflections would indicate the need for a wider approach to directionality in translation processes, in the Horn as well as in Africa as a whole.

A closer look at a few texts

To further support the claims made above, and bring our interdisciplinary analysis forward, we shall now focus on three outstanding instances of translation processes recorded in the Horn of Africa well before colonization and after its onset. A first example is provided by the *The Fisalgwos*, a Ge'ez translation of the Greek *Physiologos* attested to have been produced during the fifth century. The *Physiologos* (originally written between the end of the second century and the beginning of the

third in Alexandria) was a description of animals, stones and plants, each assuming symbolic or moral values, and was extremely popular in both Eastern and Western Christendom. It has been one of the main sources of Christian symbolism (e.g. the phoenix as symbol of Christ's resurrection), which made it the most translated book after the Bible throughout the Middle Ages. The Ge'ez version is the closest to the Greek original and was probably completed in Egypt by an Ethiopian monk in a Skete monastery. The translation of this book had a twofold impact. On the one hand, it fitted successfully with the cultural landscape of Ethiopian Christianity deeply imbued as it was with a culture of symbolism, while, on the other, this religious tradition was linked with a larger community both in the Eastern and Western Christendom, with whom their religious values and symbolism were shared.

A second example is *The History of High Ethiopia or Abassia (Historia de Ethiopia a Alta ou Abassia)*,⁴ by Manoel de Almeida, a Portuguese Jesuit missionary who had travelled to Ethiopia in 1624. This book was largely an interpretation and rewriting (recodification) of a previous work, *Historia de Ethiopia*, written by Father Pero Paez around 1622 and never published (Pennec 2003).⁵ De Almeida relied heavily upon Ge'ez materials such as the Royal Chronicles and a *History of the Galla (Zēnāhū laḡallā)*, written in 1593 by Bahrey, who was an Orthodox monk. Bahrey's book was a history of the Oromo people, referred to at the time as Galla. This text has been greatly appreciated because, although reflecting the Amharas' (people speaking Amharic) perception of the Oromo, it went beyond the conventional genres of the time (hagiography and chronicles), producing a detailed historiographic reconstruction of the Oromo expansion in the sixteenth century and constituting a major source of knowledge concerning this people until the eighteenth century and beyond (Gusarova 2009). In translational terms, De Almeida's book can be seen as a double translation. On the one hand, as mentioned above, it is a rewriting of Paez's *Historia de Ethiopia*, in terms that were more appropriate for the Jesuit hierarchy and their missionary goals; on the other, he relies heavily on Ge'ez sources and therefore tends to project an image of Ethiopia that is heavily influenced by the Ge'ez-Amhara-Christian discourse.

A third example is offered by Johannes Kolmodin, a Swedish orientalist and linguist (and therefore not involved in Italian colonial administration),⁶ who transcribed Tigrinya oral traditions pertaining to the history of the populations of the rival villages of Hazzega and Tsazzega never previously codified. Kolmodin's (1912) *Traditions de Hazzegaet Tsazzega*⁷ remains a seminal work for the history of Eritrea from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries and an outstanding example of ethno-linguistic and philological research (Negash 1999; Gebremedhin 2011). From the perspective of our discussion on directionality, Kolmodin's work is also extremely relevant as it raises important issues. One issue deals with methodology, and is treated in great detail in the introduction, which he wrote in French. Kolmodin begins by explaining his method, based on fieldwork among local communities with the support of local informants and advisors, whom he acknowledges individually,⁸ something that was not particularly common in those years. Kolmodin then points out that when transcribing the oral traditions, he had consciously adopted a Tigrinya standard based on the language used by his informants, differing from that used by both Catholic and Swedish missionaries active in other areas. By so doing, he raises another important issue, that of the written codification of Tigrinya, which could be seen as a challenge to the supremacy

of Amharic through a variety of this vernacular language that came directly from its speakers. Finally, Kolmodin's book is also relevant as he ignores (or challenges) existing notions of verticality within the Italian colony, and after having been published in 1912 the Tigrinya version of his *Traditions de Hazzega et Tsazzega* was published in a French translation in 1914 (Kolmodin, 1915), thus ignoring the language of the colonial ruler.

Conclusion

The last three examples seem to confirm that the approach defined within this article is appropriate for the analysis of translation processes in Africa, or part of it, whether these processes involve what is normally assumed to be "translation proper" (from one language into another), the writing of orally transmitted languages and cultures, or the production of europhone literature in and on Africa. The strength of such an approach lies in its interdisciplinary nature, whereby translation phenomena, broad though they are, are seen as embedded in historical events, or as historical landmarks themselves.

One of the aims of this article has been to push the observation spectrum beyond the all-too-commonly discussed colonial context, examining the rich history of interlingual and intercultural exchanges in the Horn and the whole of Africa over the centuries before colonialism. Another aim, which goes hand in hand with the first, has been to highlight African agency in translation processes, before but also *during* and *after* colonization. As a further development, these aims could be pursued by looking at today's landscape; namely, at the way in which directionality in translation is yet again challenged by the penetration of African languages within European countries, cultures and languages, what Ali and Alamin Mazrui refer to as "linguistic counter-penetration":

Yet another factor that may aid the continued survival of some indigenous African languages is a more global one: *linguistic counter-penetration* engendered by the African diaspora. Just as Western languages have penetrated deep into the African continent, the growth of the African diaspora in Canada, Europe and the USA has enabled African languages to begin counter-penetrating the West. (1998, 47, emphasis added)

Although perhaps not consciously, linguistic counter-penetration does involve African agency, which other scholars are also emphasizing, in other forms and on other fronts. Ghirmai Negash, for instance, like many other contemporary African writers and translators, advocates the systematic translation into Western languages of literary works written in African languages,

for indeed, although most of the great postcolonial writings in African literature are coded in European languages, and African-language literatures are not habitually associated with "serious" writing, [they] demonstrate the capability of African-language literatures to carry the larger "political" and "quotidian" realities of Africa as they evolve across historical time and – often fiercely contested – social space(s). (2009, 87)

However, in addition to looking at today's directionality in translation and writing-as-translation in Africa and on Africa and the desire never to lose sight of African agency, interdisciplinary studies like this one ought to promote the systematic

investigation of interlingual and intercultural exchanges “country by country”, to use Atangana’s phrase, thus building a solid history of translation in Africa.

Notes

1. Consider, among others, the teaching and research activity carried out at Stellenbosch University, North-West University, University of South Africa and University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg.
2. In Ge’ez, Amharic and Tigrinya, *abba* means “father”. In religious terms, it is commonly used to address priests and monks.
3. With Western modernity we refer to the complex interplay of missionaries, explorers, scholars and colonial administrators who were active in the region starting from the late eighteenth century. Moreover, with this broad, open-ended term we aim to refer to processes and events that are much wider than those usually implied by “colonialism”.
4. De Almeida’s book was published posthumously in an abridged version in 1660.
5. Pero Paes’ book was published only three centuries later, in 1903, by the Jesuit Camillo Beccari (Beccari, 1903). It was commissioned from Paes by his superiors as a Jesuit answer to two previous works written 1610–11 by Dominican theologian Luis de Urreta, who maintained that Ethiopian Christians were not schismatic but belonged *de facto* to the Catholic Church. This declaration was considered by the Jesuit leadership to constitute a dangerous challenge, and Urreta’s argument delegitimized their argument in favour of deep missionary involvement in the Horn. However, Jesuit authorities did not appreciate Paes’ handling of his task and asked De Almeida to rewrite the book. In this regard, see Pennec (2003, 245–248, 264–268).
6. Eventually Kolmodin was recruited as an advisor by the Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie and worked in this capacity in Addis Ababa at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 1931 until his death in 1933 (Halldin Norberg 1977).
7. Kolmodin (1914) also published a critical edition of Ge’ez manuscripts dealing with the history of the Tsazzege and Hazzega families.
8. Kolmodin (1912) mentions Bahta Tesfa Yohannes and Tewolde Medhin Gebremedhin. The latter was to play a crucial role in the development of the Tigrinya language as well as in the cultural and political history of Eritrea and Ethiopia.

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