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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Digital Humanities and the Geopolitics of Knowledge

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In this article I briefly discuss the connections between the geopolitical scenario emerging from the creation of the BRICS New Development Bank, and the digitization of languages and cultures carried out in a substantially Anglophone-driven economic and technological context. The appearance of the new BRICS bank, and especially the plan for an "independent Internet" are not only challenging the financial system, but in the long-run could also affect the current digital knowledge monopolies, activating new ways to encode and decode cultural objects, and challenge present digital standards. Digital Humanists, on all levels, are called upon to react to this developing geopolitical scenario, asking themselves questions about political representation and cultural diversity, encoding standards, digital infrastructures and linguistic hegemonies. An old equilibrium based on unequal power relationships is perhaps close to an end, and this is a unique time and opportunity to create a genuinely democratic and international scholarly community.

Keywords: geopolitics (of knowledge); BRICS; South–South dialogue; technology and cultural diversity; linguistic tax

Dans cet article, je discute brièvement des liens entre le scénario géopolitique qui émerge de la création de la nouvelle banque de développement des pays du BRICS, et la numérisation des langues et des cultures réalisée dans un contexte économique et technologique essentiellement anglophone. L'apparition de la nouvelle banque des BRICS et en particulier le projet d'un « internet indépendant », remet en question non seulement le système financier, mais à long terme pourrait aussi toucher les monopoles de connaissances numériques actuelles, en mettant en œuvre de nouveaux moyens d'encoder de décoder les objets culturels, et remettre en cause les normes numériques actuelles. Les humanistes numériques, à tous les niveaux, sont invités à réagir au sujet de ce scénario géopolitique émergent, et à se poser des questions au sujet de la représentation politique et la diversité culturelle, les normes d'encodage, les infrastructures numériques et les

hégémonies linguistiques. Un ancien équilibre fondé sur des relations de pouvoir inégales est peut-être près de prendre fin, et il s'agit d'une période et d'une occasion unique de créer une communauté érudite véritablement démocratique et internationale.

Mots-clés: géopolitique (de connaissances); BRICS; dialogue sud-sud; diversité technologique et culturelle; fiscalité linguistique

The Geopolitics of Knowledge

Two years ago, the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) announced the foundation of their own bank (<http://ndbbriics.org/>). The new-born financial institution seems to be a direct challenge to the Western supremacy led, ever since the end of WWII, by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (Totten 2014). The BRICS have signed agreements in different areas and aim to establish their own rating agency, their financial circuit and a “private Internet” that would bypass the USA hubs, now a mandatory bottleneck-filter for all Internet traffic (Patrizio 2015; Lee 2016). Geography and politics are destiny even on the Internet (Blum 2012: 113), and some of the most important material pieces of the global network, from cables to data centers, are concentrated in few hands and places. When direct control is not technically feasible, governments take appropriate steps, as shown by the “security agreements” signed between the US government and foreign telecommunication companies for securing access to undersea cables’ data (Timberg 2013; Timberg and Nakashima 2013). The Internet infrastructure is not flat; it crosses borders and tends to overlap with existing paths of historical disputes and foster new political aspirations. In other words, “everything you read about geopolitics, about spheres of influence and national interests and so forth has a counterpoint on the Internet, and how Internet structure plays out” (Cowie 2011; cited by Hurst 2013).

One relatively transparent aspect of this intricate geopolitical scenario is the map of the major connectivity providers, the so-called ‘tier one providers’ (T1P). Their networks are comprehensive in so far as they do not need to purchase transit agreements from other providers (DeNardis 2014: 109–111; Blum 2012: 124–125). Although the financial and commercial arrangements between these

giants are not publicly known, the T1P are officially thirteen. Nevertheless, the core of the backbone lies in the hands of seven sisters (some say three: cf. Blum 2012: 125): Level 3 Communications (USA), TeliaSonera International Carrier (Sweden), CenturyLink (USA), Vodafone (UK), Verizon (USA), Sprint (USA), and AT & T Corporation (USA): “What results is a tightly interconnected clique of giants, often whispered about as a ‘cabal’” (Blum 2012: 124).

Undoubtedly, this condition does not favor the BRICS. They represent the 25% of the world GDP, 43% of world population (3 billion people) and possess hard-currency reserves estimated to be around 4.4 trillion dollars. Recently, other emerging countries, such as Turkey and Indonesia, with yearly GDP growth rates of respectively around 5% and 6%, have been considered for inclusion in the group.

Keeping in mind these data, I would like to describe the “Cost of Knowledge” (<http://www.thecostofknowledge.com>) with the words of the Spanish sociologist and writer Joaquín Rodríguez:

Three of the world top-five publishing groups are specialized in scientific, technical and professional content management and publishing for highly qualified communities that need constantly updated content. The Anglo-Dutch Reed Elsevier (also promoter of Science Direct and Scopus), the Canadian Thomson Reuters (producer of Web of Science)¹ and Wolters Kluwer (Dutch company which merged with the German colossal Bertelsmann & Springer, to become Springer *Science+Business*) – not only have these three giants revenue figures unimaginable for publishers working in other sectors [in 2013 Reed Elsevier had a turnover of \$7.2 billion]but, above all, they dominate and control the production, spread and use of the knowledge produced by the scientific community. (Rodríguez 2014)

¹ Although company's operations are based in the US, Thomson Reuters is the result of Thomson's (a Canadian corporation) purchase of British-based Reuters group on April 2008. While I was writing this article, Thomson Reuters announced it had agreed to sell its intellectual property and science business (including Web of Science) to private-equity funds affiliated with Onex Corp. and Baring Private Equity Asia for \$3.55 billion in cash. For some reflections on this new scenario, see Fiormonte and Priego 2016.

But what is the connection between the BRICS bank, the Internet infrastructure and the Western domain of scientific publishing? Oligopoly and concentration of power in one area is certainly alarming, but the real danger come from the interconnections between different levels. Mark Graham reminds us that information and knowledge are the essential ingredients of the global economy, and so “it is important to understand who produces and reproduces, who has access, and who and where are represented by information in our contemporary knowledge economy” (Graham 2014: 189).

Graham et al (2011) in their *Geographies of the World's Knowledge* presented a series of maps showing the linguistic, cultural and geographical biases of global knowledge, in terms of both infrastructure and cultural discourse:

The United States and the United Kingdom publish more indexed journals than the rest of the world combined... Most of the rest of the world then scarcely shows up in these rankings. One of the starkest contrasts is that Switzerland is represented at more than three times the size of the entire continent of Africa. The non-Western world is not only under-represented in these rankings, but also ranks poorly on average citation score measures. Despite the large number and diversity of journals in the United States and United Kingdom, those countries manage to maintain higher average impact scores than almost all other countries. (Graham et al. 2011: 14)

The linguistic bias of the global journals system, an ingredient often neglected in the literature against the publishing oligopoly (Larivière, Haustein, and Mongeon 2015; Kieńć 2016), introduces a second devastating element: an evaluation system based on the “core journals” does not only limit or make impossible scientific innovation coming from non-core journals and geographic peripheries, but constitutes the biggest threat to cultural diversity. Many non-Anglophone countries in fact adopted evaluation criteria that favours English over native languages, even in Humanities and Social Sciences (Gazzola 2012; Priego 2015; Larivière and Desrochers 2015): “Eugene Garfield, the impact factor’s inventor, claimed in 1983

that “Western journals control the flow of international scientific communication almost as much as Western news agencies monopolize international news.” (Garfield 1983; following Guédon 2008). Several changes have occurred since that time in research communication system, but despite them, Western domination seems to be untouched” (Kieńć 2016).

Although there is no necessary relationship between international visibility, language of publication and research quality, what happens today is that an Italian or Latin American Literature scholar publishing in English would score/rank better than a colleague that writes on the same subject in Italian or Spanish. But are scholarly texts, as cultural products, independent from their language of production? And what will the destiny of our cultural heritage be if we will be discouraged to describe, analyze and study it through our own languages (Fiormonte 2015)?

The Geopolitics of DH

Let me step back a bit. In March 2014 there was a discussion on the mailing list of the AIUCD (the Italian Association of Humanities Computing and Digital Culture) about joining the European association of digital humanities (EADH). It is not useful here to recall all the details of that discussion, however it was clear that two very different geopolitical approaches emerged. In my opinion much more than an evaluation about the possible membership of EADH was at stake. Indeed, as I noted in an email sent to the list:

Three levels of issues are strictly interwoven: 1) an exquisitely political issue, that is AIUCD political delegation and the representation of other national organizations among the current containers (the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organization and the European Association of Digital Humanities) as well as their own operation; 2) an issue aimed at representing the cultural, linguistic and disciplinary differences existing inside and outside those organizations; 3) an issue referred to the scientific presence of the non-Anglophone researches inside the DH international background. (Fiormonte 2014)

Unfortunately, it turned out to be impossible to discuss these issues in a plenary assembly as proposed during the previous members meeting of the AIUCD. That said, what is interesting to analyze, in my opinion, is the nature of the reasons (and of the argument) behind decisions which are quite common in academic and scientific organizations. What we are dealing with here is an anxiety and fear of being “cut out” from the “international” game. Does this sound familiar?

The membership of EADH was, after all, a secondary question. The real issue was ADHO, an organism that defines itself as internationally representative of the Digital Humanities, but that still lacks a bottom-up democratic structure. The members of the Steering Committee are not elected by the members, but by the boards of each Constituent Organization. The reason is that ADHO was created by a club of “constituent organizations” (USA, UK, Australia, Canada and Japan), which, in fact, gets to decide the who, how and why of membership. The conduct of these and similar organizations, consortia and associations, recalls what the Finnish jurist Martti Koskenniemi wrote in criticizing international law: “Universality still seems an essential part of progressive thought – but it also implies an imperial logic of identity: I will accept you, but only on the condition that I may think of you as I think of myself.” (Koskenniemi 2004: 515).

It has to be said that the community of digital humanists has been historically more open to diversity than many other scientific communities, where Anglophone supremacy is taken for granted (see Milan Politecnico’s self-harming case [Frath 2012; Gazzola 2014]). There is an old debate going on in the Humanities about monolingualism in science (Frath 2014; Kiefer 2014), and several proposals have been made by DH scholars (Risam 2014). The Global Outlook Digital Humanities group (<http://www.globaloutlookdh.org>) set up within ADHO shows the commitment of many colleagues to reduce the Anglophone and Western biases. But although information sharing and visibility of non-Anglophone initiatives are important topics, GO::DH and ADHO so far did not challenge the real power issues (Grandjean 2014), that is political representation, evaluation of research products and inequality of access to resources and technology.

A Cuban colleague more than one year ago wrote to the GO::DH mailing list expressing a willingness to sign up to ADHO and received many encouragements. However, why, if I am a Cuban or, say an Uzbek citizen, I am individually allowed to become a member of ADHO, while, if I am Italian, Spanish, or German, I have to pass through EADH? The evident purpose is to encourage membership without the commitment to subscribe to the expensive journal. But this doesn't call into question the closed model of ADHO; on the contrary, it reinforces it. As I noticed above ADHO in the last two years made a big effort to become more inclusive, as showed for example by the admission of *Humanistica*, the Francophone association of DH, as Constituent Organization, as well as by the new international composition of the Steering Committee. But while with these new changes ADHO is struggling to sell an "international" image of the community, most intellectual tools remain in the hands of the Anglophones: the annual conference, the Humanist mailing list, the monolingual LLC/DSH journal, the more or less sponsored monographs (such as the *Companions*). Not to mention software, languages and so-called "standards" like the Text Encoding Initiative. In fact, why English-speaking colleagues should ever give up this enormous capital of "symbolic power?" (Bourdieu 2013).

Standards, Codes and Biocultural Diversity

Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star (1999) have pointed out that standards and information infrastructures (code and tools) have a strong symbolic value, which can be even more powerful than their material aspect, and that control of them represents one of the main characteristics of economic life. Let's think about *time*: the convention of the Greenwich meridian (1884), which puts a local space-time model, that of the English town, at the world's center (Kern 2003). But the code hegemony exerted in the name and on behalf of the Anglophone "distributed" Empire can have more profound consequences on diversity. "Technical is always political" Galloway notes (Galloway 2004: 243), and if we want to understand "how does it work" and "whom does it work for," we should look at the political and institutional level:

I argue that the Internet is distributed not decentralized and that it is in fact highly controlled despite having few if any central points of control. (...) A distributed architecture is precisely that which makes protocological/imperial control of the networks so easy. (Galloway 2004: 25)

The Board of Directors of the international union UNICODE, whose aim is the digital representation of all world's languages, is composed of Intel, Google, Microsoft, Apple, IBM, OCLC, and IMS Health. In this list, we don't find representatives of any cultural, research, or educational institution. In this situation we can't be surprised by the criticisms coming on different fronts (Perri 2009; Walsh and Hooper 2012), charging UNICODE with ethnocentrism, and pointing out the difficulties faced by languages with a low commercial value of being properly represented (and therefore at risk of extinction): "Even if Unicode does not exactly 're-map' real life politics onto the virtual realm, such technical solutions do point to the ideological, political, and economic forces that promote and serve to benefit from attempts at universal language" (Pressman 2014: 151).

At the core of digital communication protocols and languages there is therefore a mix of semiotic and/or representational issues. As George Steiner wrote in *After Babel*:

[T]he meta-linguistic codes and algorithms of electronic communication which are revolutionizing almost every facet of knowledge and production, of information and projection, are founded on a sub-text, on a linguistic 'pre-history', which is fundamentally Anglo-American (in the ways in which we may say that Catholicism and its history had a foundational Latinity). Computers and data-banks chatter in 'dialects' of an Anglo-American mother tongue. (Steiner 1998: xvii)

The central issue is not the English language per se, but the hegemony of a single *code* (and encoding system) for everything. It is this 'Anglo-American Esperanto', which allows the inflection and organization of the digital knowledge Empire in accordance with proportions and modes never experienced before in history (not even under

Roman Catholicism). But is this situation favorable to the rest of the world? The BRICS' new bank, as well as other important moves on the scientific knowledge scenario (Fiormonte and Priego 2016; Fiormonte 2016), are clear geopolitical (and cultural) signs: China, India, Brazil, Russia, and other emerging economies of the world are now standing up for a multipolar world. The United States, Europe, and their satellites, at the moment, are not. From a geolinguistic point of view, none of the countries of the BRICS, including China, would be able to impose its language and cultural codes on the rest of the world. Instead, the advantage of the current dominant language and its collective imagination is evident. Obviously, we are not able to know whether the BRICS, after challenging the hegemony of the western-dominated financial system, will also take up a position against Western's monopolies of knowledge. On the other hand, we do not need a coalition of regional world powers to replace the existing Empire; instead, what we need is to found a completely different system of political, social, and economical relations. A multipolar player on the field, however, is a good sign.

Can we keep on ignoring what is happening in the world and the connections we activate (or not) when making a choice? From massive network surveillance to scientific knowledge oligopolies, from Monsanto-Bayer to Google-Alphabet, there is a thread connecting the access to knowledge to a more equal political representation, the defense of local produce to the preservation of endangered languages and cultures (on July 2016, Monsanto, an American multinational agrochemical and agricultural biotechnology corporation leading [among other things] the production of genetically engineered seeds and herbicides, received an offer from Bayer for a takeover proposal. According to many commentators, the deal could have profound and negative effects on farmers, consumers and the global agricultural system [Bunge and Henning 2016]). Which codes and languages, what kind of food, which memories are expected to survive in the future? And who is going to take the necessary decisions? Cultural biodiversity is then intertwined with the questions of the energy, food, and technological interests at stake. The scientific community – in fact all scientific communities – are called upon to stand up for their own identities in a changing world – even if there is one part of it that doesn't want to hear about

change. A strong imbalance cuts across internal and external boundaries of nations and world regions, and what we need now is a creative effort to counterbalance this trend. My own uncertainty about the AIUCD partnership with EADH, rested upon nothing but this: a different vision of the relation between core and periphery (knowing how problematic those terms are [Galina 2014]), the refusal to bow to hegemonic codes and mainstream research, the exploration of alternative alliances, and ultimately the creation of a cultural project aimed at breaking free from the boundaries imposed by fear, anxiety, and the need for legitimization.

Conclusions and some proposals

In my view, the only way to begin to limit the damage caused by monolingualism and received geographies of knowledge in DH is to undertake a plan of action and adopt a kind of “border thinking” (Mignolo 2012) from the margins, where often the means are less, but the freedom to innovate is greater. In the last decade the global north seemed to have abandoned theory, but “for the global south, the refusal of theory has long been an unaffordable luxury” (Comaroff and Comoroff 2012: 48). Today the relationship between assumed innovations centers (i.e. Silicon Valley) and peripheries is faltering, and both the global south and the East are developing “radically new assemblages of capital and labor” that can “prefigure the future of the global north” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012: 12). Hence the provocative question by Comaroff and Comaroff: *is Euro-America evolving toward Africa?* It is therefore vital that the *emerging peripheries* talk amongst themselves, and boost the South-South dialogue on theoretical models and practical shared solutions. We can observe a similar vitality and intellectual curiosity in the digital knowledge scenario of many regions and countries of the global south (Chan 2014). As Octavio Kulesz notes in discussing the model of the digital edition in developing countries.

The electronic solutions that certain countries of the South have implemented to overcome their problems of content distribution can also serve as a model for others, thus facilitating South–South knowledge and technology transfer. ... Sooner or later, these countries will have to ask themselves what kind of digital publishing highways they must build and they will be faced with two very different options:

a) financing the installation of platforms designed in the North; b) investing according to the concrete needs, expectations and potentialities of local authors, readers and entrepreneurs. (Kulesz 2011: 16–17).

Nevertheless the principle must also be established that the cost of Anglophone monolingualism cannot be borne entirely by non-Anglophones. The suggestions set out below should not prove too costly to implement, and more importantly, do not renounce the use of English as a *lingua franca*:

1. Apply the concept of “pluricentric standards” to publications in DH (Schneider 2014) in the use of English, to mitigate the negative impact of centralized policy and knowledge supremacy (authors and editors mostly from the USA and the UK, or their Anglophone allies), on the variety of expression and local cultures: as Schneider says talking about “Asian Englishes”, the local variants of English reflect the multicultural richness of the speakers, and in any case the definition of a “Standard English” is nowadays problematic (Schneider 2014: 254).
2. Develop several forms of “linguistic tax” to counteract the disadvantage or degree of exclusion of non-Anglophones.
3. Create a *decentralized and federated* organization that represents the various geopolitical and linguistic areas in the world, based on the principle of “one organization/country = one vote”. The founding principle of this federation should be multilingualism, decolonization of knowledge (Adriansen 2016) and cultural diversity (see the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, the Vienna Manifesto on European language policies, etc.).
4. Create a genuinely multilingual free-access journal (which would investigate the possibility of annotating and translating articles, commentaries and reviews, etc. into other languages).
5. Consider the possibility of changing post-publication practices (Bastian 2014). This would mean complementing, or, in certain cases (for example articles by young researchers), replacing the peer review process by

an expedited editorial evaluation, and then allow readers/reviewers to comment and annotate the work in more detail. The authors could then include these revisions in their text.

6. Translate websites, materials and resources connected with the organization or its various initiatives and publications into several languages.
7. Create a collection of open access texts, calling on Anglophone communities to undertake the *translation and circulation* of studies from marginal or disadvantaged regions and communities.
8. Connect the question of digital representation to technological choices and hence to cultural and linguistic issues.
9. As a result of what has been proposed so far, we should differentiate geopolitically and methodologically conferences in the field, allowing the possibility (as in a THAT-Camp) of organizing basic events, at different times of the year and in different places, with no obligatory format, language, methodology, etc. so that the organization's status as a federation is always maintained.

These proposals can be grouped under concept of "cultural exception", applied to the field of exposition, writing and publication of scientific research. "Cultural exception" is an expression coined in the 1980s to describe that set of political and commercial strategies put into action by the European Union, particularly as a French initiative, to protect its own cultural industry from expansion by the US. Although the cultural exception arose some years ago, it is conceptually an offshoot of UNESCO's Universal Declaration of Cultural Diversity, signed in Paris in November 2001. Article 1 says:

Culture takes diverse forms across time and space. This diversity is embodied in the uniqueness and plurality of the identities of the groups and societies making up humankind. As a source of exchange, innovation and creativity, cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature. In this sense, it is the common heritage of humanity and should be recognized and affirmed for the benefit of present and future generations.

On the other hand, article 9 says that states have a duty to create the necessary conditions for the efficient circulation of “diversified cultural goods and services through cultural industries”. In the opinion of some legal experts the cultural exception thus protects not only sectors that operate traditionally in the marketplace (cinema, TV, music), but also those areas of cultural heritage which are excluded by definition (rites, beliefs, folklore, etc. [Foà and Santagata 2004: 3.1]). Finally, there is an explicit reference (art. 6) to the preservation of multilingualism. While the Declaration does not cover the products of science and invention, which fall within the legal jungle of patents and copyright, it could form a viable basis for fashioning a more culturally and linguistically inclusive form of Digital Humanities.

In addition, on point 1) above, there is a case where institutional representation intersects with the linguistic and semiotic hegemony. One of the key slogans of the American Revolution was “no taxation without representation”. If it is impossible to avoid the Anglophone domain, then we can invert the slogan: “taxation against overrepresentation”. There are two ways to fight a monopoly: you either withdraw from the monopoly, which in the case of the English language is impossible, or you make some concessions to its competitors. If all the languages and cultures should be on the same level, and we all agree that the extinction of diversity must be avoided, then a moderate and symbolically variable “tribute” levied against the normative center would be one of the few viable options.

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Competing Interests

I declare that I have no significant competing financial, professional, or personal interests that might have influenced the performance or presentation of the work described in this text.

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