

# Translation Ecologies: A Beginner's Guide

**Thomas Beebee, Dawn Childress & Sean Weidman**

**Abstract:** This article applies basic concepts of ecology to the cultural environments of literary translation, arguing that the duality of source-target twin texts should be considered within contexts corresponding to the different cultural systems of increasing complexity that are nested within one another: populations, communities, ecosystems, and biomes. The ecological-systemic approach to translation combines polysystem theory with social network analysis and the possibility that a digital humanities accounting of metadata signaling the overall environment for translation in the US may provide insight. The article ends with a discussion of the authors' current project to make a Big Data approach to translation operative.

**Keywords:** translation studies; world literature; literary polysystems; digital humanities; social network analysis

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**标题：**翻译生态学：入门指南

**内容摘要：**本文将生态学概念运用于文学翻译的文化语境中，指出应当在语境中考虑原文与译文这对二元对立的文本，使之符合相互嵌套而愈发复杂的不同文化体系，包括：人口、群落、生态系统及生物群系。在美国，翻译的生态系统法将多元系统理论与社交网络分析相结合，同时，数字人文能够记录元数据所表示的整个翻译环境，也为这一方法提供了思路。最后，本文以笔者目前的项目为基础，探讨大数据方法如何运用于翻译工作。

**关键词：**翻译研究；世界文学；文学多元系统；数字人文；社交网络分析

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Since the 1980s there has been a ground shift in approaches to literary translation. This shift in paradigm can be characterized as a widening of critical perspective beyond the previous narrow focus on the double linguistic artifact: source (original) text; and target (translated) text. This focus was narrowed still further by a governing ideology of “fidelity” that literalized the metaphor of translation as a “carrying over,” and that restricted the task of the translation critic to that of judging the perfection of duplication of one text by its rendering in another

language. As Susan Bassnett summarizes the shift, “Theorists of translation in the 1970s, who included poet-translators such as James Holmes, firmly rejected any notion of equivalence as sameness, pointing out that not only are languages different, but literary systems with their attendant norms are also different” (Bassnett 60). Holmes himself offered the following: “No translation of a poem is ever ‘the same as’ the poem itself. It can’t be, since everything about it is different: another language, another tradition, another author, another audience” (Holmes 53). Contemporary translation scholars have come to recognize three things: 1) that the source text is only one factor in determining the specific configurations of the target text; 2) that the source text is not a fixed essence, but an impetus to various readings and a cloud of interpretative choices; and 3) that the target text intervenes in the target language and literary system — to a greater or lesser degree, depending on a variety of factors. All of these points lead one to conclude that a focus on linguistic differences between source and target texts gives a highly filtered view of the function of translation in cultural transfer. An accurate, panoptic view of literary translation should value it not only as an attempt to preserve the linguistic or literary integrity of the original, but at least equally as a new intervention in the target literary system. Moreover, we need to recognize that numerous actors collaborate in order to bring about a published translation: literary agent; translator; publisher; funding agency; reading public; distribution channel, and so forth. This system of translation is surrounded by its environment, for example by the economics of publishing, by the technological infrastructure, and by the parameters of the target literary system. “Environment” is used here in the system theory sense of the word, as everything not belonging to a system — the limits of which are the boundaries of autopoiesis, i.e. of cybernetic control — but capable of interacting with it (For a detailed explanation, see la Cour). An ecology can be thought of as a description of systems together with their environments in which the scope of system is scalable. In titling his book *An Ecology of World Literature*, Alexander Beecroft meant that his investigation focused on the relation of “world literature with its environment,” that is, largely with how closely tied the literature is to local conditions and how far its reach is. Beecroft posits six essential relations, which encompass expanding areas of cultural interaction: epichoric; panchoric; cosmopolitan; vernacular; national; and global. “Greek” tragedy began as an epichoric form in Athens, became popular in many other Greek cities and thus panchoric, was preserved in the cosmopolitan Ptolemaic empire, and is currently global, with translations and adaptations in many languages of the world. Borrowings of the term “ecology” such as Beecroft’s are entirely legitimate.

The English word was derived from the German, while for a set of French and Central European thinkers who developed what today we might call systems theory in the mid- to late-nineteenth century — Alfred Espinas, Guillaume de Greef, Ernst Haeckel, and Albert Schäffle — “organism” was a key term that could apply equally well to living beings and to social institutions (See Bauer). This slippage or shared terminology between biology and sociology continued later into the century, with comparatists such as the French scholar Ferdinand Brunetière, who in 1890 published the first of two volumes on the evolution of literary genres, *L'évolution des genres dans l'histoire de la littérature*, treating these literary abstractions as though they were living creatures fighting for survival. From the late twentieth century onward, “ecology” has been applied to a number of non-organic spheres, one monument for which is Gregory Bateson’s *Steps To an Ecology of Mind* (1972). Phrases such as “information ecology,” “ecology of conversation,” “ecology of knowledge,” and “media ecologies” have paved the way for a notion of literary ecology, as in the work of Hubert Zapf, who explores literature “as an ecological force within culture that presents “human experience as part of a shared world of bodily experiences and embodied minds” (Zapf 90). In speaking of ecology in the narrow sense, that is, as a science attempting to understand the ways that living creatures interact with each other and with their environments, there is a structure of systems nesting within environments. Beecroft projects a similar structure for world literature: epichoric or “local” literary products are nested within a panchoric system that filters some local products for wider reception, while ignoring others. Greek tragedy — which was invented in Athens as part of its civic celebration — is a famous example of an epichoric performative genre that quickly became epichoric, as Greeks from every region took an interest in the form. The largest ecological environment is Gaia, also known as the biosphere or the Earth, which is usually divided into biomes, defined as generalized habitats such as tundra, desert, or tropical forest. Within biomes are ecosystems, within ecosystems communities, within communities’ populations, which are in turn made up of individual organisms.

When we transfer the idea of ecology to translation, then the equivalent of Gaia or the biosphere is world literature, while that of biomes is the generic and formal divisions of literature that create sparse or rich opportunities for translation. Ecosystems parallel what Itamar Even-Zohar has called literary polysystems. Communities represent the particular conditions of creation and publication of translations in specific language contexts at particular historical moments, while populations are the sets of authors and books to be translated — translators, editors,

reviewers, and the like — who tend to operate under different circumstances, with different sets of goals and objectives. The parallel sets of systems can be summarized in the table below:

<b>Ecologies</b>	<b>Translation Ecologies</b>
Gaia	World Literature
Biomes	Literary Forms
Ecosystems	Literary Polysystems
Communities	Sets of relations and interactions between authors, translators, publishers, reviewers, etc.
Population	Authors, translators, publishers, reviewers as populations sharing common goals and behaviors
Individual	Individual author, translator, publisher, etc.

*Figure 1: Ecologies vs. Translation Ecologies*

To start with the largest area, the biosphere, translation is the lifeblood of world literature. The analogy is exact, since translation allows for the circulation of ideas and texts between cultural spheres, enriching and invigorating the repertoire of ideas and styles, especially in literature. For millennia, translators shared almost equal footing with “original” creators, and creators were in fact frequently adapters who performed or depended upon translation. Examples include Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare, Alexander Pope, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. World literature, to use David Damrosch’s famous phrase, consists of literary texts that overall “gain in translation” (Damrosch 281). At such a high level, we can only discern the broadest outlines of translation ecologies, such as the ubiquitous presence of the world’s most translated — in terms of frequency and/or in terms of numbers of languages — literary works: the Bible; Lao Tze; Sophocles; Cervantes; Tolstoy; Jules Verne; Agatha Christie. In Durs Grünbein’s extended metaphor,

there is a Himalayan range of literature, and its high-points are well-known. This world-mountain is dominated by a chain of seven- and eight-thousand meter high peaks, which have stood there for centuries. We are speaking of such mighty cliffs as the ever-snow-capped Peak Dante, the wide-ruling Mount Shakespeare, divided into several summit peaks, around the two broad-shouldered elephant-rounded Mons Rabelais and Monte Cervantes. In the middle, the silhouettes of the high Goethe and the sharply contoured Pushkin. [...] The particular pathways to such

greatness are invisible to us, just like roadways and bridges cannot be discerned in the famous blue-marble photo of the earth.” (Grünbein 23; my translation)

This is the panoptic, Gaia-perspective on world literature, where the canonical or currently popular authors (for the present we could add Paolo Coelho and Haruki Murakami, for example) appear as solid peaks. When we zoom in, however, we see that those peaks are in fact more like the Egyptian pyramids, enormous human-made structures, and we can discern the equipment and the transportation routes that allowed their construction. These are the routes of translation, circulation, and publication.

The sublime image of the “roof of the world” for agreed-upon or documented canonical texts of world literature presents an interesting paradox, because translations tend to fit the source text into a form or genre provided by the target system. To show this, let me compare two versions of the opening of Homer’s *Iliad* — one by Samuel Butler, and one by Christopher Logue. Obviously, I could compare many more versions, but these have been chosen for maximum contrast, and to illustrate the primacy of literary form as a large-scale environmental habitat into which a translation must fit. The scene is the famous opening dispute between Achilles and the leader of the Greek expedition against Troy, Agamemnon, who has been forced to return his bed-slave and who now seeks compensation by taking Achilles’ own female war-prize. Achilles of course resists this solution, and a fierce argument develops between the two. Butler’s version of their exchange (*Iliad* II. 1:120 ff.) goes:

And Achilles answered, “Most noble son of Atreus, covetous beyond all mankind, how shall the Achaeans find you another prize? We have no common store from which to take one. Those we took from the cities have been awarded; we cannot disallow the awards that have been made already. Give this girl, therefore, to the god, and if ever Jove grants us to sack the city of Troy we will requite you three and fourfold.” Then Agamemnon said, “Achilles, valiant though you be, you shall not thus outwit me. You shall not overreach and you shall not persuade me. Are you to keep your own prize, while I sit tamely under my loss and give up the girl at your bidding?” (Butler 4)

The same lines in the Greek original stimulated the following intervention by

Logue:

Until Achilles said:  
 'Dear Sir,  
 Where shall we get this she?  
 There is no pool.  
 We land. We fight. We kill. We load. And then —  
 After your firstlings — we allot.  
 That is the end of it.  
 We do not ask things back. And even you  
 Would not permit your helmet to go round.  
 Leave her to Heaven.  
 And when — and if — God lets me leap the Wall  
 Greece will restock your dormitory.'

'Boy Achilleus,' Agamemnon said,  
 'You will need better words  
 And more than much more charm  
 Before your theorizing lightens me.  
 Myself unshe'd, and yours still smiling in the furs?  
 Ditchmud.' (Logue 13)

Butler (1835-1902) chooses the biome of prose, and in fact more of newspaper reporting than of whatever in English literature might best correspond to epic. Jorge Luis Borges wrote that Butler had transformed the *Iliad* into an "ironic bourgeois novel" (Borges 1136) and a "sober series of news items" (1138). And indeed, Butler was known for his prose, such as the satire *Erewhon* and the novel *The Way of All Flesh*. Logue (1926-2011), on the other hand, was a lyric poet, and it is as lyric that he imports the *Iliad* into English. Neither is interested in preserving the formal markers of epic. For example, neither preserves the famous Homeric epithets. In the original Greek, Achilles literally asks where the "great-hearted Achaeans" (μεγάθυμοι Ἀχαιοί) will find Agamemnon a prize. Butler also drops the epithet "well-walled" (ἐντειχέον) from Troy, while Logue collapses it into "the Wall." Homer's constant use of epithets is among the many markers of epic that make the reading tedious if translated literally and consistently. Leaving them out, as here, is not a mistake, but a recognition that the form of Homeric epic in Greek does not really correspond to anything in English, and certainly not to anything in modern

literature. Conversely, there is no rhyme in Homer, whereas Alexander Pope added it to his version, in order best to convey an idea of the heroic. Our point here is that the first question to be asked about a translation concerns the choice of literary form that best corresponds to the original, the specific ecology of literary form into which it is to be translated.

The next largest unit, corresponding to an ecosystem in biology, is what Itamar Even-Zohar dubbed the literary polysystem. “Polysystem” is a hard word to define, but the term itself gives the idea of its important conceptual point, that there is not *a* literary system in a particular language, but several: canonical versus popular; performative versus written; adult vs. children’s; original versus translated, and so forth. Just as ecosystems are comprised of several interlocking communities — animals eat plants, plants need water, and so forth — as these take advantage of the physical features and affordances of their environment, so too the literary polysystem has no single center, no single periphery. “The emphasis achieved by the term *polysystem* is on the multiplicity of intersections, and hence on the greater complexity of structuredness involved. Also, it strongly stresses that in order for a system to function, uniformity need not be postulated” (Even-Zohar 291). Various institutions, such as booksellers, publishers, libraries, and universities, are the intermediary gears that allow for dynamic transfers between systems that have little or nothing to do with each other directly. A press may limit the number of works of “high literature” — especially ones in translation — that it publishes in order to concentrate on its increasingly profitable list of graphic novels or non-fiction books, for example. These literary sub-systems interact with each other only in a very limited fashion, yet changes in one may cause changes in the other, or changes in both may be caused by the environment.

Communities, on the other hand, consist of populations that do interact with each other directly. William Marling’s book *Gatekeepers: The Emergence of World Literature in the 1960s*, can be described as a set of detailed studies of translational communities. The interface between the different populations in these communities he calls “gatekeeping,” and “success in World Literature is about gatekeeping” (Marling 1). Gatekeepers can be fellow authors, agents, translators, reviewers, and academics who advertise through publication and lectures, and who determine textbook adoption. Most of the gatekeeping is, of course, not done by the authors themselves, whose major task — beyond good writing — is to curate the set of gatekeepers working on their behalf. Marling provides eight study-examples, involving four different languages. The eight examples consist of four pairs of authors, one of whom can be considered a world literature success, while the other



is less so. These pairs are: Gabriel Garcia Márquez and Rigoberta Menchú Tum; Charles Bukowski and Diane di Prima; Paul Auster and Lydia Davis; and Haruki Murakami and Banana Yoshimoto. Figure Two below is a visual representation of the ecology of gatekeepers who helped the Japanese author Haruki Murakami to world literature prominence. The different populations who worked on Murakami's behalf listed above are all present, and sort themselves into three main "blocks" or sub-communities: Waseda University; US connections; and the literary prize system. Murakami's first translator and gatekeeper, Alfred Birnbaum, an American ex-pat and fellow alum of Waseda University, was heavily involved in online forums where interested parties would read and assess others' translations. Through this activity, Birnbaum maintained a wide network in his field, while Murakami interacted little with this side of his work. Murakami, after being tutored in translation by a former professor at Waseda University post-graduation, used these skills to meet and discuss his craft with the American writers he considered influential, and he would end up translating American literature into Japanese, especially Raymond Carver and John Irving. Irving probably pointed Murakami towards the need for a literary agent. Murakami's US contacts also led him to his own main translator, Jay Rubin. Finally, Murakami's first publication came as a result of winning a literary prize, the Gunzo, and he has gone on to win numerous other ones in a widening international circle. His best-known prize has now become the one he does *not* win year after year, despite being an odds-on favorite for it: the Nobel. In contrast to Murakami's success, the flip case study of Banana Yoshimoto, who also was aided by the prize system, reveals one key difference in interest: "she acquired top-flight academic translators, but she does not curate a translation corps, nor does she translate" (Marling 140). While this is not the only difference in their writing, it does have some impact on at least the Anglophone reception of Yoshimoto's work. Translation is a two-way street for Murakami (i.e., he curates his corps of translators while also doing his own translations into Japanese), and the connections established via the translation highway are crucial to his status as a world author.

This systemic approach to translation helps make study of translation suitable to digital humanities approaches. The higher we go in terms of system reach and complexity, the more we encounter the three "Vs of Big Data": volume; velocity; and variability. Yet, while the databases of translated fiction, drama, and poetry are large enough to qualify as Big Data, in recovering the translation ecology we are working in an environment of scarcity. We are increasingly experiencing what Lawrence Venuti has called the "translator's invisibility." Translators' names

are frequently missing from library catalogs, bibliographies, dust covers, and sometimes from the title pages of books, leaving us with an incomplete record of the contributions of translation to the literary system.

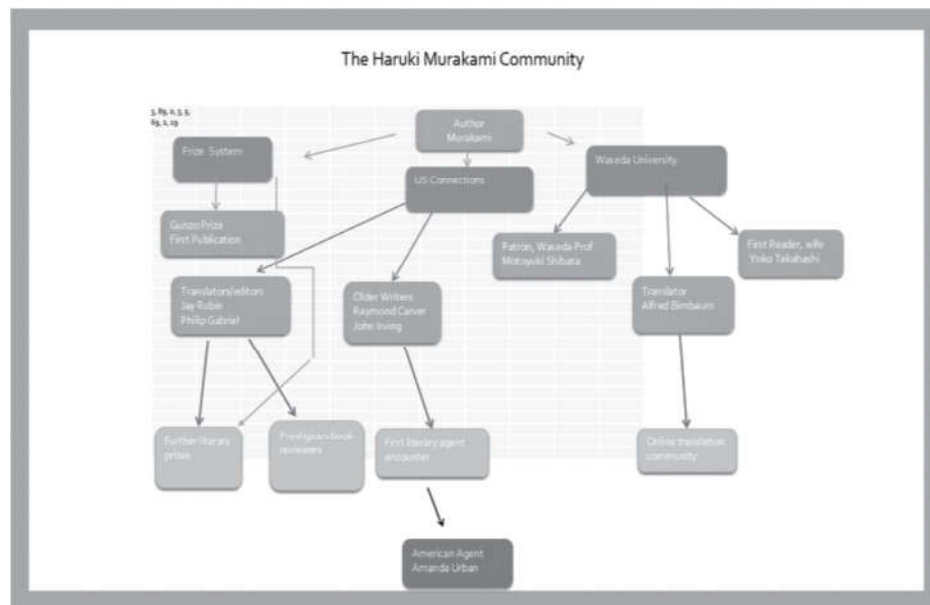


Figure 2: The Haruki Murakami Translation Community<sup>1</sup>

One attempt at overcoming the invisibility is the translation database maintained by Three Percent Books (<http://www.rochester.edu/College/translation/threeppercent/index.php?s=database>). Three Percent was named after the oft-cited statistic (first established by Bowker, a leading provider of bibliographic information) that only three percent of books published in the U.S. are translations. By collecting as many catalogs as they can and asking publishers directly, Chad Post and assistants have managed to come up with a fairly accurate record of the original translations of fiction and poetry published or distributed here in the United States since 1 January, 2008. The spreadsheet has entries for work title, language and country of first publication, author and translator names and genders, publisher, and literary form. By “original,” they are referring to titles that have never before appeared in English (at least not in the US). So new translations of classic titles aren’t included in the database, and neither are reprints of previously published books. The focus is on identifying how many new books and new voices are being made available to English-speaking readers.

<sup>1</sup> Figure Two is based on a visualization of Marling’s discussion (115-42) by Grace Duval.

With this database of nearly a decade of translated literature in hand, we can already begin to identify communities. The graph in Figure Three shows graphically the community of translations published in the US in English of literature originally written in German. In it, we can see a number of discrete communities forming, sometimes around publishers, in some cases around translators. The circles are called “nodes” and refer to entities such as authors, publishers, and translators.

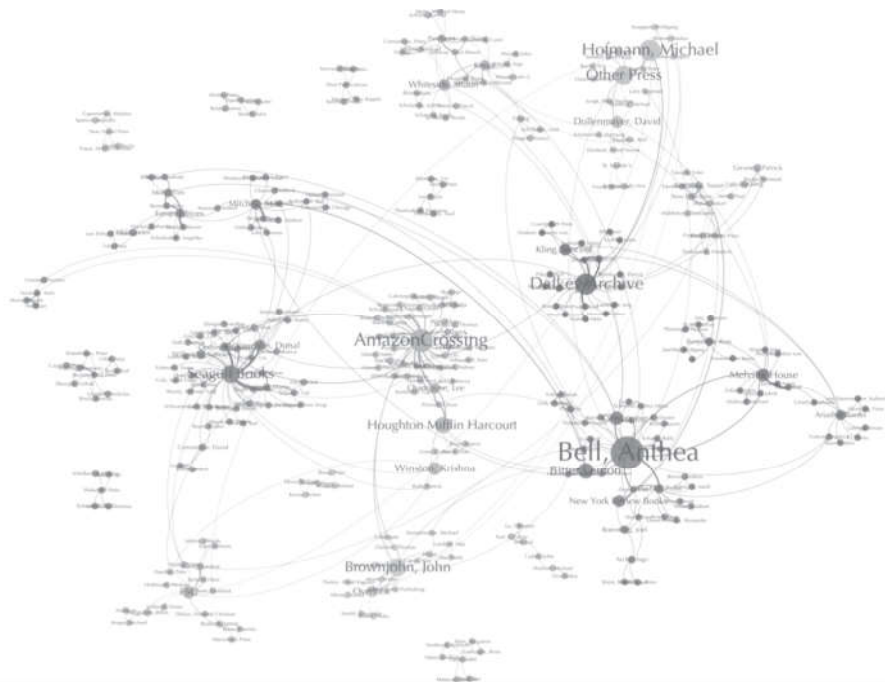


Figure 3: Translation Ecology of German Literature published in the US

The lines connecting the nodes are called “edges” in the vocabulary of network analysis. They indicate a relationship, such as a translator translating a particular author, or publishing their translation with a particular press. We can see that some nodes are much larger than others in this graph. The varying sizes of the node are based *not* on the number of translation made or published, but on their relative “betweenness centrality.” This type of measurement helps to determine potentially important players in a network. The translator Anthea Bell (1936-) comes “between” the largest variety of authors, publishers, and other translators from the specific language of German. The size of the node is a signal for us to then “scale down” or “zoom in,” i.e. to explore the place of this particular translator as an individual within a specific population of translators, and within the whole community of actors that allows a translation to come into being. In other words, to parse the

connections of the translator Anthea Bell in much the same way as we have done for the author Haruki Murakami.

Once we zoom in a little (Figure Four), we can see that most of our detected communities center around a publisher with a higher betweenness centrality, like we see here with Amazon Crossing. We're anticipating that the additional data we collect on publisher and translator types will allow us to focus in on these relationships and to discover patterns that provide further insight into the makeup and nature of translator dominated-communities vs. publisher-dominated ones. We have noticed that within some language groups there are larger numbers of individuals with high betweenness centrality, while some others tend to be dominated by publisher-defined communities. This is not necessarily surprising, but may yield further insights as we enhance the data. It's also important to note here that high betweenness centrality is a measure of the *potential* for serving as a bridge or conduit for transmission; the degree to which this position in the network is leveraged is another matter.

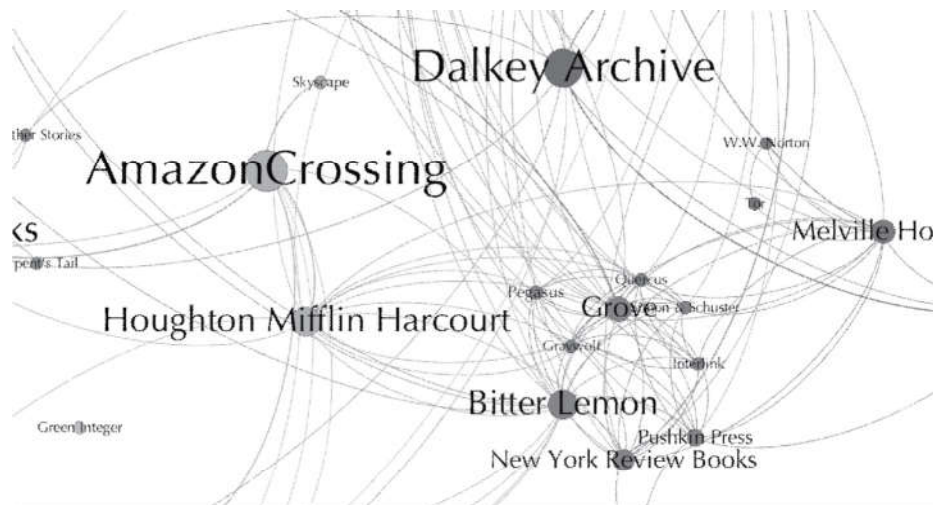


Figure 4: Reduction of Graph to Use Only Publishers as Nodes

Mirroring its ecological definition, the idea of “community detection” in network analysis is somewhat counter-intuitive in the sense that there may be little “communal spirit” between the various populations. Rather, the ties may be ones of purely material interdependence; translators who share a publisher or an author, for example, are part of a community even if they never interact directly with one another. Community hubs can be, alternately: authors who bring together translators, publishers, and agents; publishers who bring together translators,

authors, and agents, granting agencies who bring all three of the above groups together, and so forth. We are, of course, hoping to discover other agents or conditions around which a community (in the ecological sense) might coalesce. For example, what communities surrounding Latin American authors translated in the 1960s might we find, and will these communities be determined by academic departments, funding agencies, publishers, or other conditions of their creation? Do we see communities forming around the conditions of creation, the conditions of recognition the conditions of dissemination, or some other substrate?

Three Percent's Translation Database helps provide more visibility to translation communities, but the authors of this article wondered about the extent to which we could look beyond the texts and immediate actors to other elements. As Hoyt Long puts it, how might we capture data on "ideological forces, social relations and institutions, and the expanding systems of circulation, diffusion, and influence?" (Long 283) We are attempting to address this question and have begun experimenting with data points related to publisher and translator types, affiliations, literary prizes, gender, and so on. The resulting dataset will necessarily be complex and uneven and require a flexible and forgiving data model and a robust query system. It would also be beneficial for translation scholars and anyone interested in the translation ecosystem to be able to explore the breadth of the data visually to see what interesting trends and patterns emerge that merit closer inspection. The project "Six Degrees of Francis Bacon" — which might be categorized as a "correspondence ecology" surrounding the famous English philosopher-scientist — gives an idea of what this might look like. Ideally, we hope to develop a central datastore of 21<sup>st</sup>-century literary translation in English that can be open, collaborative, flexible, and functional in its design, support a variety of datasets, and be open to a wide variety of queries about translation ecologies of the English-speaking world, from the most basic such as which publishers show the greatest number of translated volumes within a particular timeframe, to the relative receptivities of biomes of US literature for different literary forms from around the globe.

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