An Exploration of Lingua-Cultures on YouTube: Translation and Assemblages

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Abstract
Online platforms allow the instantaneous and simultaneous circulation of media content on a global scale, and geographically fragmented audiences of media content circulated through such platforms engage with the same content at their convenience. Such media distribution in today’s digital culture problematizes the traditional conceptualization of lingua-cultures, which is predetermined based on the concept of nation-states. The aim of this study is to contribute to theorizing the concept of lingua-cultures on the Internet in relation to the role of translation that boosts the mobility of cultural products across national borders. To this end, I draw on the Deleuzian concept of “assemblages” and look into what translation-driven communities can reveal about different language constituencies using an illustrative example of a YouTube vlog with bilingual subtitles. Ultimately, I argue that lingua-cultures in digital media culture can be redefined as constellations of heterogeneous people who display their perceptions, attitudes, and expectations of self and others using a common language, while engaging with media content for various purposes and in different ways.

Keywords
lingua-cultures, assemblages, translation, YouTube, media distribution, transnational communities

Introduction
Online platforms allow the instantaneous and simultaneous circulation of media content, including translated content, on a global scale, and geographically fragmented audiences of media content that is circulated through such platforms engage with the same content at their convenience. This environmental change of media distribution in the age of new media challenges the traditional division of lingua-cultures that used to be predetermined based on the concept of nation-states. Lingua-cultures were previously understood as a concept based on a close, inner association between the people in the nation and their first language (see Risager, 2014). In line with this static understanding, in the age of mass media, source and target cultures in the global media landscape were also considered separate language constituencies with a clear borderline between them (see Pérez-González, 2014). In other words, media distribution was used to adopt a linear model from a source culture, with original media content produced in the source language, to a target culture, with media content recirculated in the target language; this perspective is described in detail in the next section. However, developments of various online platforms that facilitate the (re)circulation of media content regardless of physical constraints have enabled geographically dispersed individuals to engage voluntarily with media content and form collectivities around such content. In this context, this study explores the fluid nature of the boundaries of language constituencies extant within online platforms and proposes an alternative way of conceptualizing lingua-cultures in today’s digital media sphere. Specifically, this study seeks a more nuanced understanding of lingua-cultures in the contemporary media sphere in relation to the role of translation that boosts the mobility of cultural products across national borders.

YouTube is an open platform that embraces a variety of languages and cultures across geographic boundaries, and many of its users are aware that anyone can access the videos that have been uploaded on the platform. YouTube makes it possible for viewers, who are often geographically distant from each other, to participate in the enjoyment of a variety of vlog content. YouTubers often directly address “the Internet audience” who are digitally connected around the world, and thus media content circulated through YouTube is...
often characterized by “the globalization of intended audience” (Strangelove, 2010, p. 45). As a result, YouTube, which embraces a variety of lingua-cultures, is driven by a spirit of “neo-Babelianism,” understood as “the desire for mutual, instantaneous intelligibility between human beings speaking, writing and reading different languages” (Cronin, 2003, p. 59).

Paradoxically, however, the openness of YouTube—which seemingly makes the instantaneous and simultaneous distribution of audiovisual content on a global scale possible—may pose a question about the universality of “digital language,” in which “information is generated, stored, retrieved, processed, and transmitted” (Castells, 2010, p. 29) on the Internet. Even though YouTube provides a setting for the simultaneous circulation of media content across geographical borders and for the gathering of people from different lingua-cultural backgrounds around such content, actual encounters and interactions between them are based upon the premise that lingua-cultural barriers are bridged or removed. In this context, the use of a lingua franca—that is, “a contact or vehicular language” (House, 2013, p. 280) used by a group of various speakers whose language levels are different for a communicative purpose (see Stewart, 2013)—and translation plays a pivotal role in facilitating global exchange by enabling people to overcome the communication barriers originating from linguistic differences. In other words, a lingua franca and translation—including translation into and from the lingua franca—may significantly influence the processes of deconstructing and reconstructing the boundaries of spaces in which heterogeneous individuals engage with media content and form collectivities around such content. Nevertheless, how translation contributes to the deterritorialization and reterritorialization of media content and viewers on YouTube has been surprisingly underexamined in media studies, cultural studies, and translation studies. Against this background, this study explores how translation may contribute to shaping language constituencies around translated content circulated through YouTube, where geographically scattered users encounter each other.

In this article, I argue that lingua-cultures in digital media culture can be redefined as constellations of heterogeneous people who display their perceptions, attitudes, and expectations of self and others using a common language, while engaging with media content for various purposes and in different ways. To that effect, I draw on the concept of “assemblages” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) and look into what translation-driven communities can reveal about different language constituencies using an illustrative example of a YouTube vlog with bilingual subtitles.

This article consists of four main sections. The first section outlines how media distribution models have changed from a centralized, top-down model in mass media culture to a participatory, networked model in today’s digital media culture. The second section examines the fluidity of community boundaries in online culture by drawing on the concept of a “sense of community” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The third section suggests the notion of “assemblages” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) as a way of conceptualizing how geographically dispersed people build virtual communities around media content on the Internet. The final section presents an example of a translated culture-brokering video and investigates viewer comments to illustrate how the boundaries of language communities on YouTube can be modulated and adjusted in accordance with how people interact with each other.

The Evolution of Media Distribution

In traditional mass media culture, media flows were led by the centralized media industry, which tended to adopt linear, top-down models of media dissemination among discrete lingua-cultures predetermined by media distributors. In the global media industry, media distributors divided the international marketplace into “territories” according to cost (e.g., logistics and translation) and revenue (e.g., buying power; Chaume, 2013; Gambier, 2003; Kirkpatrick, 2019). For example, since the cost of producing French dubs is expensive, the territory of France not only includes France itself, but also “French-speaking Europe” (i.e., French-speaking Belgium and Switzerland, and occasionally, French-speaking Africa) and even the “French-speaking world,” which includes some parts of Canada, Haiti, and Polynesia (Kirkpatrick, 2019; see also Chaume, 2013; Risager, 2014). Australia and New Zealand are also usually dealt with as the same territory because of their close geographical proximity and the use of English as a common language. In particular, because they are in the southern hemisphere, which sometimes influences the distribution of seasonal media content, they are often separate from other English-speaking countries in the global media landscape (Kirkpatrick, 2019). In short, lingua-cultures in the traditional media sphere used to be considered region-bounded language constituencies that were grouped by the mainstream media according to their commercial logic. This top-down approach to media distribution has consolidated “a significant degree of political and ideological control over the reception of their audiovisual products, including their translated versions” (Perez-Gonzalez, 2014, p. 53). In particular, commercial subtitling and dubbing that conform to such a linear model of media distribution have contributed to solidifying “the economics of geographic windowing and region coding, helping to mark territorial borders and control (and cost) aspects of space and time” (Dwyer, 2017, p. 129) in the traditional media sphere.

However, since the advent of Web 2.0 characterized by interactive and participatory features that facilitate links among individual web users and their collective activities (O’Reilly, 2005), technological advances have contributed to shaping today’s participatory environments in digital media culture, which differ from the media ecology led by the traditional media industry. Digital technologies have profoundly affected the ways in which ordinary people engage
with media content. Specifically, a range of digital technologies have dramatically reduced the capital cost of recording, sharing, and archiving experiences, thereby enabling ordinary people to participate actively in the creation and dissemination of media content. In other words, such technological developments have fostered a “participatory culture” in which people are allowed or encouraged to voluntarily engage in media production, remediation, and recirculation as part of creative self-expression or civic engagement (Jenkins et al., 2009). This environmental change has in turn facilitated what analysts have termed “participatory democracy” in the media sphere. Participatory democracy not only provides “a condition where grassroots political participation and decision making in the economy, culture, and all spheres of society is the norm,” but also raises questions about the undemocratic, exclusive ownership of “the means of production” (Fuchs, 2011, p. 209). In fact, there are opposing viewpoints on the democratic potential of the contemporary Internet that concern the commodification of digitized data (e.g., Lyon, 2018; Vaidhyanathan, 2012; Zuboff, 2015). However, when it comes to the empowerment of ordinary people in today’s digital media culture, participatory democracy can at least be interpreted as the redressing of the asymmetrical relationships between the centralized media that once monopolized media production and circulation and their passive audiences in conventional mass media culture.

As one of many other digital technologies that have contributed to participatory democracy, online platforms have significantly enhanced viewers’ ability to (re)circulate media content within their own environments and to develop collectivities with like-minded people, transcending national borders. Here, it is worth noting that YouTube provides users with a function that enables them not only to add videos to their own playlists on the platform, but also to share them easily with people on various other platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, which has contributed to a fundamental change in a media distribution model. In contrast with the linear model of top-down media distribution led by traditional mass media, the circulation of YouTube content, including translated content, often takes a viral model. This relies on viewers’ voluntary engagement in networked participatory environments, where individuals are connected within and across online platforms. In such digital environments, as Green and Jenkins (2011) argue, media content may “spread through audiences, not via purposeful sharing but by infecting person after person who comes into contact with it” (p. 114). In other words, audience roles in the digital media sphere are not restricted to those of mere recipients of media content that is disseminated by centralized mainstream media advocating industrial logic and bureaucratic practices (Lévy, 2001). Rather, audiences play a key role as media distributors, circulating media content worldwide, even including content produced outside the dominant cultural industry, such as content produced by individual YouTubers. Therefore, the viral model of media distribution, which relies on audience participation, can be “multinodal, connecting countries that have had limited communication in the past” (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 261), and contributes to shaping today’s fluid and diversifying media flows in participatory digital culture. Relatedly, such a viral model, which can circulate media content rapidly and unexpectedly, provides YouTubers with opportunities to develop communities by mobilizing geographically dispersed interests and like-mindedness.

In this context, the languages that YouTubers use to communicate with their viewers may significantly influence the international distribution of media content, and an increasing number of YouTubers are producing translated videos to appeal to a global viewership and to develop social ties with them. Translated videos produced by YouTubers are idiosyncratic in terms of the ways that translation enables geographically fragmented audiences to engage with media content, which has remained an under-researched area. In the literature, translation within participatory online platforms has mainly revolved around the collective endeavor underpinning the practice of interlingual and intercultural mediation, which often relies on users’ free labor (O’Hagan, 2009; Perrino, 2009). For instance, fansubbing—which refers to producing amateur, fan-made versions of subtitles for various cultural products, including anime, dramas, and films—is one such form of audiovisual translation that takes place in participatory online settings. Fansubbers usually translate source materials to cater to the demands of fellow fans who are audience niches neglected by the centralized, industrial media (Dwyer, 2017; Lee, 2011). In other words, fansubbing can contribute to bridging “gaps between the territorialized distribution of foreign cultural products” (Lee, 2011, p. 1143) by facilitating language diversity. In this regard, translated videos produced by YouTubers may seem similar to fansubbed videos, as both provide multiple language versions of subtitles. However, fansubbing is an on-demand translation activity that exploits viewers’ collective intelligence and intervenes in media distribution by appropriating commercial content, which is usually driven by viewers’ recognition of fellow fans who belong to the same language community. On YouTube, viewers may also contribute to these fan-based, collective, and cooperative translation practices by submitting their own versions of captions using the feature that the YouTube interface offers. By contrast, translated videos produced by YouTubers reflect the content creators’ own desire and willingness to reach out to certain target language constituencies. Furthermore, YouTubers’ videos do not always ensure the mobilization of their target viewers as, in a globally connected environment, including YouTube, the actual audience groups that mobilize around such content might be different from content producers’ target audiences (Marwick & Boyd, 2011).

In sum, online platforms allow the instantaneous and simultaneous circulation of media content, including translated content, within globally networked environments, and geographically fragmented audiences of media content that is circulated through such platforms engage with the same
content at their convenience in pursuit of individual interests and agendas. This environmental change of media distribution in the age of new media challenges the traditional division of lingua-cultures that used to be predetermined based on regional concepts and in ways that often mapped language communities onto essentialist perspectives that have relied on “crystallized collective identities” (Pérez-González, 2010, p. 261). To explore this further, the next section discusses community-building on YouTube.

**Fluid Membership Boundaries of Virtual Communities**

The mobility of media content across physical and geographical borders and the networked model of media distribution that is facilitated by online platforms problematize the traditional way of understanding lingua-cultures as physical, regional communities bounded by locality (see Heller, 1989). Indeed, one of the most significant social ramifications that transnational media have brought about is “a reconstruction of ‘place’ or locality” (Athique, 2014, p. 5). Hence, conceptualizing lingua-cultures in the context of YouTube requires a more nuanced understanding of language communities in today’s participatory digital media culture. In particular, this study focuses on the voluntary participation of geographically dispersed viewers in interactions with YouTubers and other viewers, as audience engagement plays a vital role in the formation and sustainability of YouTube communities.

YouTube provides various communicative features that facilitate interactions between YouTubers and viewers, such as rating and comment features, which make the platform “a social media site, rather than a mere video repository” (Lindgren, 2012, p. 153). Viewers can freely decide how to engage with each video clip (e.g., by watching, giving likes or dislikes, posting comments, and/or subscribing to the channel). Among the various forms of viewer engagement, comments are one of the central communicative methods used by viewers to respond directly to YouTube content (Burgess & Green, 2018). In particular, insofar as producing and circulating YouTube videos is a form of asynchronous communication with a non-present audience (Probenius, 2014), comments play a crucial role in facilitating mutual recognition among YouTubers and viewers. Indeed, even if YouTubers have a target audience in mind, the presupposed audience remains invisible and latent until the viewers post their own comments on a given video. Furthermore, comment-posters can contribute to the development of social ties with YouTubers and fellow viewers by displaying their specific reactions to videos, thus consolidating online communities around media content. Such virtual communities that are developed by those who pursue shared interests and like-mindedness can be defined by drawing on the concept of “a sense of community,” a term that denotes “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9). In fact, face-to-face communities and virtual communities may share a similar sense of community (see Blanchard, 2007; Blanchard & Markus, 2004). However, a sense of community is more likely to play a more significant role in consolidating virtual communities, which usually have less or no physical contact among members and thus have looser membership structures (Park et al., 2015). In this regard, a virtual community can be understood as a group of people who share and develop a sense of community through a variety of online activities on the Internet.

A sense of community consists of four constitutive dimensions: “membership,” “influence,” “integration and fulfillment of needs,” and “shared emotional connection” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). These dimensions are interrelated and reinforce each other. Among these key dimensions, “membership”—defined as “the feeling of belonging or of sharing a sense of personal relatedness” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9)—is especially relevant to the establishment and sustainability of community boundaries. The development of membership involves building community boundaries, which serve the function of differentiating members from non-members and of creating spaces where members can develop a shared belongingness and identity. Within community boundaries, members can express their unique individuality and subjectivity, and they can exchange and share these traits with other like-minded people who make connections with each other (McMillan, 1996).

However, community boundaries are not fixed, eternal barriers; in principle, they can be continuously modulated and adjusted depending on how people in a group interact with each other. The boundaries of YouTube-based communities are also unstable and flexible. As mentioned earlier, YouTube viewers can freely decide whether and how to engage with each video. Furthermore, on each YouTube page, various forms of viewer engagement with media content are recorded and stored in real time (Androustopoulos, 2010; Benson, 2016), and accordingly, each video page as a participatory space can be shaped in an infinite number of variations. In particular, viewer comments not only contribute to establishing noticeable boundaries around each video clip, but also show how comment-posters develop a sense of community while expressing themselves and exchanging their thoughts and feelings with others.

However, it is noteworthy that boundaries are not always constructed based upon shared opinions or upon unanimity among people. Rather, dynamic processes of developing connectedness and collectivities, which sometimes include the negotiation of conflicting arguments, may help the establishment and evolution of boundaries (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Therefore, the establishment of membership within YouTube communities needs to be understood as an ongoing, participatory process that enables potential and existing members to become aware of each other as they exchange and share a sense of community.
YouTube Communities as “Assemblages”

The emergent and interactive process of building “boundaries” of online communities and developing “membership” recalls the Deleuzian concept of “assemblages” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Assemblages are “complex constellations of objects, bodies, expressions, qualities, and territories that come together for varying periods of time to ideally create new ways of functioning” (Livesey, 2010, p. 18). In other words, assemblages may refer to any kind of collectivities and thus can be interpreted in diverse ways, “from the behaviour patterns of an individual, the organisation of institutions, an arrangement of spaces, to the functioning of ecologies” (Livesey, 2010, p. 18). Assemblages can be conceptualized spatially in ways that illuminate the fluid, dynamic boundaries of language communities on YouTube that are shaped by YouTubers who produce their own translated videos and by their viewers from all over the world. In fact, the concept of assemblages has drawn much attention from a number of geographers, who have attempted to redefine “the social,” including territories and communities, as “materially heterogeneous, practice-based, emergent and processual” (McFarlane, 2009, p. 561).

In line with this geographic understanding of the social as assemblages, it is possible to apply assemblages as a concept to virtual communities of affinity, particularly to YouTube communities. Conceptualizing the formation of communities as assemblages—that is, as a panoply of heterogeneous elements—challenges the essentialist perspective, which asserts that the negotiation of identity relies on “crystallized collective identities” (Pérez-González, 2010, p. 261), such as gender and race. However, as a number of researchers argue, many “taken-for-granted and effectively naturalized truths (like race and gender) were historically and socially produced” (Robbins & Marks, 2010, p. 178), and they could have been differently shaped or might not even exist (Hacking, 1999; Robbins & Marks, 2010). In this regard, the essentialist perspective may confine our thinking to “the social,” including territories and communities, as “materially heterogeneous, practice-based, emergent and processual” (McFarlane, 2009, p. 561).

Furthermore, as Marwick and Boyd (2011) point out, within online open platforms, content producers’ target audience might be different from an actual audience. Moreover, within anonymous online environments—where people can freely decide whether, to what extent, and how they speak—audiences’ identities can only be recognized by their enunciative practices (Anaz, 2014). In this context, the YouTube comment feature offers technological affordances that allow the articulation and exchange of viewers’ perceptions, attitudes, and expectations on the platform, making the contingent connection of YouTube users possible (Murthy & Sharma, 2019; see also Slack & Wise, 2014). Indeed, technologies may provide new possibilities for “the contingent relations among practices, presentations, and experiences that make up the world” (Slack & Wise, 2014, p. 151), and comments play a significant role in making such connections in the YouTube context. By posting comments, viewers can facilitate mutual recognition among themselves and YouTubers and fellow viewers, while making themselves visible within their (potential) communities and directly communicating with other people. In other words, comments are a means of community-building and boundary negotiation, and constellations of those YouTube viewers are shaped by their communicative practices, which open up new discursive spaces (Collier & Ong, 2005; Li, 2009) that can be understood as “collective assemblage[s] of enunciation” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 88, emphasis in original). In addition, given that collectivities are formed by viewer comments, it can be argued that in principle, the boundaries of YouTube communities can be continuously modulated and reshaped as comments are accumulated. Indeed, any place, including a natural landscape, can be understood as an “open-ended event” that is constantly renegotiated through the accumulation of time and spatial shifts, and there is no such
thing as pre-given coherence, a fixed community, or collective identity (Massey, 2005). In line with this understanding, YouTube communities can be considered trajectories of interactions among YouTube users. These relational and processual aspects of community-building can also constitute YouTube communities as assemblages.

Thus, it is not always sufficient to find common denominators among community members to identify the logic behind the formation of virtual communities. Rather, we need to pay more attention to how individuals make connections with others who do not necessarily share their affiliations or ideological frames (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). In this regard, the concept of assemblages provides an alternative way of understanding the consolidation of collectivities as a dynamic process that involves the negotiation of individual constituents’ heterogeneity and the continuous development of mutual affinity among them. Therefore, this approach allows us to appreciate that a variety of communities, particularly in digital media culture, emerge through an interactive process whereby intersubjectivity is constructed through the community participants’ voluntary engagement with media content and other people.

Language Constituencies on YouTube as Assemblages

The Example of JOLLY

While this article is an attempt to contribute conceptually to the notion of lingua-cultures on the Internet as assemblages, this section examines the fluid nature of the boundaries of language constituencies on YouTube by drawing on an illustrative example of a translated video from qualitative research conducted as part of my doctoral project. The video has been uploaded on the YouTube channel JOLLY, which is run by two British YouTubers, Josh and Ollie. JOLLY is one of the most popular Korea(n)-based channels run by foreigners, with 2.2 million subscribers as of July 22, 2021. In their channel description, Josh and Ollie state that their aim is to “introduce[e] Korean and British cultures to each other”—that is, to participate in culture brokerage, which refers to “bridging, linking, or mediating between groups of persons” (Jezewski, 1990, p. 497). Videos uploaded on JOLLY normally incorporate multiple versions of subtitles at the same time (i.e., Korean and English subtitles; Figure 1).

Traditionally, bilingual subtitling has been deployed in the context of mainstream, interlingual audiovisual translation to circulate simultaneously different language versions that render the same source text. This practice used to be confined to multilingual communities and countries, such as Belgium, Finland, and Israel (Gambier, 2003). By contrast, the subtitles deployed in videos on JOLLY usually consist of combinations of intralingual translations that represent the YouTubers’ English speech in English and interlingual translations that represent the English speech in Korean (Figure 1). It is not uncommon to incorporate bilingual versions of subtitles into Korea(n)-based YouTube videos produced by foreigners. In particular, the YouTubers explain in one of their videos that they produce multilingual, open-captioned subtitles—that is, subtitles that are superimposed on the videos and thus cannot be turned on or off according to users’ preferences or needs—as those subtitles provide viewers with opportunities to “have both languages at the same time, which [viewers] can’t have with YouTube subtitles.” Thus, JOLLY’s use of bilingual subtitles unequivocally shows that the YouTubers recognize and acknowledge viewers who belong to both Korean and English language constituencies as their target audience groups.

In this context, the following discussions address how the multilingual subtitles that are embedded in JOLLY’s video contribute to building membership boundaries by facilitating mutual recognition among the YouTubers and their geographically scattered viewers. Specifically, a group of viewers post comments on the video to discuss the extent to which bilingual subtitles are beneficial to their engagement with the video content, which indicates how language constituencies are mobilized by means of translation. By examining these comments, I illustrate how these language constituencies of viewers can be understood as assemblages.

Competing Imaginations: Homogeneity Versus Heterogeneity in the English Constituency

The first example is a comment that initiates a comment thread (Examples #1–#1d) in which a number of viewers exchange different opinions on JOLLY’s bilingual subtitles. In Example #1, the commenter, who goes by the username RISE NU’EST RISE, might be assuming that other English-speaking viewers have a similar (probably native) level of English proficiency as the YouTubers and themselves. In fact, the construction of any communities involves the mediation and sharing of imaginations among community members to some extent (Strangelove, 2010). In particular, within a deterritorialized context on YouTube, geographically dispersed viewers—few if any of whom may have physical contact with each other, as is typical among YouTube communities—may contribute to generating collective imaginations and thereby to developing mutual recognition and perceptions.

In this regard, Example #1 expresses the recognition of imagined fellow viewers as members of the same community and might reflect a feeling of membership. Specifically, this comment reveals RISE NU’EST RISE’s assumption that English speakers who belong to the community around the content are a homogeneous group of people in terms of their linguistic competence. However, the imagined homogeneity of the English constituency expressed in this comment is challenged by other viewers who post follow-up comments in the same thread or independent comments on the same video.
Example #1

You can put just Korean subtitles without English subtitles. You speak english, and we english speakers are ok, no need subtitles. i’m just saying so that you can don’t have to do the subtitles twice and lessen the work. (RISE NU’EST RISE, emphasis added)

Example #1a—a follow-up comment on RISE NU’EST RISE’s comment in Example #1—shows another English speaker’s assumption about presumably heterogeneous English-speaking viewers engaging with the same translated content for an educational purpose. Even though user 아홉은하수, the author of the comment in Example #1a, does not identify with English learners who request English subtitles, the poster supposes that viewers whose proficiency in English is lower than that of the YouTubers and of RISE NU’EST RISE’s assumed fellow viewers are still within the boundaries of the community of English-speaking viewers.

Example #1a

i think some ppl study English from the subtitles so that they put English subtitles. maybe some ppl request that they put it in. (아홉은하수, emphasis added)

These comment-posters’ competing assumptions or expectations of fellow English-speaking viewers, as expressed in their comments, may contribute to developing a sense of community, as they display their recognition of and affinity for the YouTubers and for their fellow viewers. However, the boundaries of the English constituency developed by these comments are fuzzy, and the shaping of the language community still seeks future actualization. English-speaking viewers of this video, including the comment-posters in Examples #1 and #1a, can further develop their sense of belongingness and identification with other English speakers through comments that facilitate mutual recognition. In particular, the posters’ assumptions can also be contested or confirmed by other English-speaking viewers.

Articulated Heterogeneity of the English Constituency

As evident in Examples #1 and #1a, viewers have different assumptions about the English-speaking viewers who are part of the group around the translated video. The comment-posters’ different opinions on the merit of English subtitles that reproduce the YouTubers’ speech show that their imagined English constituency of viewers consists of individuals with a similar (Example #1) or different (Example #1a) level(s) of English competence. However, there are other English-speaking viewers who express various opinions about the benefits of the multilingual subtitles. As seen in Examples #1b and #1c—both of which are follow-up comments on RISE NU’EST RISE’s (Example #1) in the same thread—the comment-posters argue that English intralingual subtitles help viewers who, like themselves, are not accustomed to British English understand the YouTubers’ British accents. In other words, through these comments, the posters make their identities as non-British English speakers recognizable within the English constituency.

Example #1b

for me, i couldn’t catch their english accent without the eng sub. so I think it is still essential . . . (yeappie, emphasis added)

Example #1c
These examples suggest that when it comes to audiovisual translation, the notion of source text needs to be understood from a multimodal perspective, that is, by examining the interplay of visual and acoustic meaning-making resources (Pérez-González, 2014). Even though the intralingual subtitles reproduce the original speech verbatim, the subtitling process involves the deployment of certain sub-modes associated with language by means of medial variants (Pérez-González, 2014, p. 199). In this case, Examples #1b and #1c demonstrate that the transcription of speech through “static writing” (Pérez-González, 2014), that is, in the form of intralingual subtitles, made the video content more accessible to certain English-speaking viewers who found it difficult to understand the content due to the “para-verbal” communication (Pérez-González, 2014), specifically the British YouTubers’ accents or varieties of the English language. In other words, the English intralingual subtitles provide those who speak different varieties of English with an alternative route to access and understand speech in the source language.

Viewer comments, such as Examples #1b and #1c, demonstrate that even English-speaking viewers—who belong to one linguistic constituency within the wider community formed around a video that is subtitled in two different languages—cannot be simply defined as a homogeneous population inside national boundaries. Within YouTube as an interactive online platform, viewers state language varieties—often lumped together by the centralized, industrial media that adopt a linear, top-down model of media distribution—as features of their identity. This group of English-speaking viewers comprises the cluster of people who speak different varieties of English and thus benefit from the video’s English intralingual subtitles to varying degrees.

In addition to the comments in Examples #1b, #1c, and #2, a commenter named mimi eruda—another poster in the same thread—also finds it useful to read the English intralingual subtitles (Example #1d). However, in this case, their comment suggests that viewers of the translated video featuring open-captioned, bilingual subtitles may not selectively read only the English or Korean subtitles. Rather, reading both versions of subtitles—each in a different language—may enhance a viewer’s understanding of the content in which multiple lingua-cultures mingle. Because multimodal meaning-making processes involve the interplay among various semiotic resources, in this case, even though bilingual subtitles convey two variations (English and Korean) of the same mode (language), the fact that such variations can be processed simultaneously by multilingual viewers may have synergistic effects that facilitate the processing and understanding of content.

Gray Area: Simultaneous Engagement With Two Languages

In addition to the comments in Examples #1b, #1c, and #2, a commenter named mimi eruda—another poster in the same thread—also finds it useful to read the English intralingual subtitles (Example #1d). However, in this case, their comment shows that the viewer can simultaneously process the two languages in the subtitles (i.e., English intralingual subtitles and Korean interlingual subtitles) and that reading subtitles in two languages at the same time can be an efficient way for the viewer to follow the content.

Example #1d

I think it’s more easy to catch what it means when I see two languages. (Mimi eruda, emphasis added)

This comment suggests that viewers of the translated video featuring open-captioned, bilingual subtitles may not selectively read only the English or Korean subtitles. Rather, reading both versions of subtitles—each in a different language—may enhance a viewer’s understanding of the content in which multiple lingua-cultures mingle. Because multimodal meaning-making processes involve the interplay among various semiotic resources, in this case, even though bilingual subtitles convey two variations (English and Korean) of the same mode (language), the fact that such variations can be processed simultaneously by multilingual viewers may have synergistic effects that facilitate the processing and understanding of content.
The next set of examples also demonstrates that viewing this translated video content through subtitles may involve the processing of the Korean and English versions simultaneously. However, Examples #3 and #4 illustrate that Korean-speaking viewers may engage with the two different versions of subtitles for additional purposes beyond understanding the YouTubers’ speech. As evident in Example #3, commenter JJ kang expresses a desire or need to understand the original speech in English while reading Korean subtitles. The poster also states that the accumulated viewing experiences of subtitled content within the YouTubers’ channel have increased their multilingual capacity. This comment suggests that the multilingual subtitling used by the YouTubers plays a significant role in helping the viewer, JJ kang, to develop bilingual competence, through which the viewer can link to the English lingua-culture.

Example #3

점점 영어가 들리네요.. 밤 처음엔 안들려서 . . . 한글만 보았는데 . . . 한글자막 영어자막 모두 보아주셔서 감사해용 ^^ (JJ kang, emphasis added)

[LT] Getting used to [your] English.. At first I was not able to follow it . . . so only watched Korean [subtitles] . . . Appreciate that [you] put in both Korean and English subtitles^^ ☺, (JJ kang, emphasis added)

In addition, Example #4 specifically shows that reading Korean and English versions of subtitles at the same time can be used for educational purposes beyond understanding the audiovisual content. In particular, viewers may appreciate the complementary advantages of using interlingual and intralingual subtitles to learn a language. The use of interlingual subtitles in language learners’ mother tongues as supplementary material enables them to understand the content, which helps them maintain their interest in learning foreign languages (Lunin & Minaeva, 2015). By contrast, accessing intralingual subtitles can provide learners who already have a certain degree of proficiency in the language with an opportunity to improve their language comprehension skills while matching the oral and written realizations of the YouTubers’ speech (see Lunin & Minaeva, 2015). Thus, in this case, commenter Soyoung Bang maximizes the educational benefit of viewing the video by exploiting the bilingual subtitles complementarily, rather than by exclusively making use of subtitles in just one language.

Example #4

우리말이랑 영어랑 항상 자막으로 직접 넣어주어서 정말 고마워요 영어공부하는데 눈 환아요.

[LT] Really appreciate [you] yourselves always put subtitles in our language [Korean] and English Very good for studying English. (Soyoung Bang, emphasis added)

In sum, Examples #1d, #3, and #4 demonstrate that when different language constituencies can be regarded as translation-driven communities on the Internet, there might be no clear-cut division between source and target cultures—that is, British and Korean cultures, respectively, in this case. In other words, the examples demonstrate that digital media content circulated through YouTube is consumed within a globally networked environment rather than within a respective nation-state. Therefore, it can be argued that language constituencies reached within YouTube may have blurry boundaries, as some constituents may position themselves at an intersection between multiple lingua-cultures for their own purposes.

Discussion

As mentioned earlier, the YouTubers are aware that their audience is made up of different language constituencies and thus they have embedded bilingual subtitles to allow their viewers to engage with subtitles in different languages simultaneously. In other words, the very existence of translations of video content reflects the desire and willingness of the YouTubers to reach out to global audiences. In this context, translations already likely serve an ontological function of facilitating mutual recognition between YouTubers and geographically scattered audiences by enabling those viewers’ engagement with the same media content. However, as mentioned earlier, what makes the presupposed audience visible is viewers’ voluntary and spontaneous participation in interactions with the YouTubers and other viewers. In particular, the emergence and shaping of collectivities around YouTube content is dependent upon viewer comments. It is worth noting here that participatory media culture does not imply that everybody must participate but rather that “all must believe that they are free to contribute” (Jenkins et al., 2009, p. 6). This suggests that YouTube viewers can also decide freely whether, to what extent, and how they engage with media content. Indeed, as illustrated in the comment examples, even though viewers are not forced to reveal their identities, including national identities, the comment-posters spontaneously disclose their personal information. Such leeway in participation may result in the contingent connections of individuals that constitute each online community as a unique unity.

Specifically, the analysis above has shown that heterogeneous viewers engage with the translated video for different purposes. In particular, even one specific language constituency that might be conceptualized as a homogeneous group consists of diverse individuals who gain different degrees of benefit from multilingual subtitles; viewer comments demonstrate that native and non-native speakers of a language and speakers of different varieties of one language can simultaneously engage with a video that is subtitled in multiple languages. Furthermore, the analysis of comments has also revealed that when it comes to the reception of audiovisual content, engagement with one language may incorporate the
processing of multiple meaning-making resources that constitute the language mode by means of various medial variants. These findings show the complexities that the boundaries of one language constituency enfold, which challenge static, regional understandings of lingua-cultures. Moreover, the findings also suggest that translations may serve not merely referential functions—that is, delivering different language versions of the narration in each video—but also interpersonal functions; the bilingual subtitles contribute to mutual recognition and identification among the YouTubebers and geographically fragmented viewers and their strong ties to a language community they (decide to) belong to.

In sum, the illustrative example shows that language constituencies mobilized around media content on YouTube are arrays of heterogeneous individuals who display their perceptions, attitudes, and expectations of self and others using a common language—while engaging with media content for various purposes and in different ways—and thereby contribute to forming flexible, fluid community boundaries. In other words, lingua-cultures within YouTube can be understood as communities of affinity that are formed and developed by geographically dispersed individuals who interact with each other by means of the same language. Therefore, lingua-cultures within YouTube cannot be regarded simply as fixed, stable collective identities; instead, they can be shaped in divergent ways depending on how viewers express their lingua-cultural identity features. Language communities on YouTube can be developed through the emergent, practice-based formation of collectivities among heterogeneous viewers who transcend certain national borders and position themselves within their chosen spaces, where they negotiate their identities and affiliations through their encounters and interactions with other viewers.

Conclusion

YouTube has brought about a change in media consumption from “small-scale home-mode viewing” to “global sharing and exchange” (Lange, 2009, p. 74), and the reception of translated media content within YouTube has also become a form of collective and collaborative activity performed by a group of people who have shared interests and agendas. In particular, media content disseminated through YouTube is consumed within a globally networked environment rather than one discrete target culture. Consequently, YouTube users can “become active members of global collectivities—clustered on the basis of mutual affinity and shared affiliations” (Pérez-González, 2013, p. 158). In other words, YouTube has significantly changed the ways in which people engage in media flows and build social ties with geographically distant others—activities that demand a more nuanced understanding of communities, including language communities. Against this backdrop, this study has examined what translation-driven communities of interest established around a subtitled vlog can reveal about the shaping of different language constituencies of viewers within YouTube. Specifically, this article has explored how multilingual subtitles that include the simultaneous display of Korean and English versions influence how geographically dispersed viewers engage with the content and participate in the process of boundary-building through which those viewers recognize and identify each other as fellow community members.

The language communities examined in this study—characterized by their heterogeneity, flexibility, and unpredictability—can be better conceptualized as “assemblages” rather than as traditional static concepts of lingua-cultures, relying on the essentialist perspective. As this study has illustrated, the development of community boundaries on YouTube involves mutual recognition and the negotiation of collective identities among viewers through their self-disclosure and display of assumptions—some of which are contested or confirmed by other communication participants—about fellow community members. Thus, it can be argued that lingua-cultures within YouTube can be redefined as constellations of heterogeneous people who make use of their latitude to make connections and engage with certain cultural identities. In other words, the audience of translated content on YouTube does not necessarily map onto a single or predetermined target culture; instead, viewers also actively engage in media flows “across political borders, market segments, and language barriers, creating deterritorialized social imaginaries that not only transcend national boundaries, but signal the emergence of new discursive spaces of audienceship” (Li, 2009, p. 9). Therefore, the concept of assemblages can provide insight into our understanding of lingua-cultures in the contemporary digital media sphere that transcend discrete national or essentialized communities that are delineated by physical and geographical borders.

Admittedly, since this study has dealt with a limited amount of data focusing on one specific YouTube channel, the findings of this research are not necessarily generalizable. However, rather than prioritizing generalizability or formulating labels (see Saldanha & O’Brien, 2014), complex and multifaceted cultural phenomena can be better understood as “the movement and flows of relationships within which things are created and animated” (Slack & Wise, 2014, p. 153). Furthermore, as Coleman and Ringrose (2013) argue, drawing on Deleuzian philosophy to understand the world helps shed light on other possibilities, in which “different kinds of things . . . might be happening, or things . . . might be happening differently” (p. 4). Thus, the main aim of this study is to share my findings to contribute to ongoing conversations about the conceptualization of lingua-cultures on the Internet. Indeed, some researchers point out that developments in communication technologies, diasporic communities, and foreign language learners challenge the essentialist understanding of lingua-cultures and shape the world as a multilingual space (e.g., Risager, 2014). However, how translation may be involved in the (re)negotiation of the fluid boundaries of lingua-cultures as
online communities remains under-researched. Therefore, I have provided examples that shed light on the contingencies of a YouTube video with bilingual subtitles for the purposes of illustration.

In fact, the language constituencies examined in this study illustrate the formation of the constituencies at a certain time and that they could have been shaped differently. In this regard, the results of this research can be further enriched by investigating other subtitling practices and language combinations. In particular, as of January 2021, YouTube offers localized service in more than 100 countries in 80 different languages. Therefore, exploring an abundance of language combinations may yield a deeper insight into how translation contributes to facilitating communicative flows among geographically fragmented viewers and to building language constituencies as assemblages within the YouTube platform. Furthermore, the concept of assemblages has potential for further research. The Deleuzian notion of assemblages allows researchers to recognize and harness both the heterogeneity of the individual identities of participants in virtual communities of interest and the complexity of the negotiation processes that such heterogeneity entails. Thus, the concept of assemblages may offer a way of illuminating the formation of online communities—not only translation-driven language communities on YouTube, but also various virtual communities on other online platforms—developed by heterogeneous community members who self-determine their belonging to a community and contribute to building community boundaries.

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Notes
1. BEST Fish and Chips in England!?! (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xQ3aBVOkhb0).
2. The project was conducted from 2016 to 2020, and the data for the research was collected in October 2018.
3. 유튜브 골드 버튼 개봉 유?!? (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FvOC-NmhfFDY) (4:48–4:51).
4. It is worth noting here that the subtitles are open captions—that is, subtitles that the YouTubers manually produced and embedded in the video. In contrast with open captions, the YouTube captioning feature allows viewers to select only one language version at a time. In other words, those captions do not provide viewers with opportunities to make use of subtitles featuring two languages simultaneously.

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