

# A PHILOSOPHY AND ETHICS OF INTERNATIONAL CLASSROOM TRANSLATION

## Communicative implications of oral mediation in Haiti

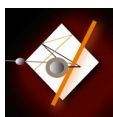
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This essay explores an international theological seminary classroom in Cap Haitien, Haiti, where the primary task is to educate Haitian students in preparation of professional Christian communication. The Visiting Professor program at Emmaus Biblical Seminary utilizes classroom interpreters and provides an opportunity to more fully explore the various dynamics of a multilingual international classroom which heavily relies upon real-time in-class translation and interpretation. The essay provides a brief introduction to the role of the English language in the classroom followed by the coordinates for developing a philosophy of communication for teaching within a multilingual international classroom setting. Finally, the Visiting Professor program is utilized as a case study for exploring the ethical implications of the theoretical framework suggested by the author of the essay.

**Keywords.** Philosophy of communication, Communication ethics, Theological translation, Orality.

Students enrolled in courses at Emmaus Biblical Seminary, located just outside of Cap Haitien, Haiti, are preparing to become professional communicators within a variety of Christian contexts. During the first four weeks of each academic semester, visiting professors from the United States, Canada, or Europe teach two two-week intensive courses. With few exceptions, the majority of classroom instruction during these intensive sessions is presented in English with each instructor being assigned a translator who assists in various classroom activities,



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including interpreting the lecture and assisting students with in-class work such as exams. I have served as a visiting professor on three different occasions including January 2013, January 2014, and September 2014. Based upon my background in communication studies, I have been teaching the Homiletics course which focuses upon the preparation, organization and delivery of sermons to be presented in a church or other Christian settings. During the January 2014 trip, I was accompanied by an undergraduate research assistant, Jacob Steen, whose observations and conversation assisted in my growing understanding of the role of a translator in an undergraduate classroom setting; therefore, this essay is a reflective contribution that combines a personal teaching case with focused commentary. The following examines the Visiting Professor program at Emmaus Biblical Seminary, which utilizes classroom translators and provides an opportunity to investigate the various dynamics of a multilingual international classroom that heavily relies upon real-time in-class translation and interpretation.

The majority of students who are enrolled at Emmaus Biblical Seminary are from northern Haiti, although many make their home in other parts of the country including those who travel from the nation's capital, Port au Prince. The only degree currently offered at the school is a Bachelor's in Theology (BTh) which can be completed with four years of on-campus study. Many of the students are already serving in a Christian ministry context and the remainder are receiving academic training in preparation of a future position. Regardless of the specific location of ministry and employment following graduation, each student is preparing to be a professional communicator within some organizational setting, with most serving as the pastor or leader of a Christian organization. These various elements come together and lead to the following guiding question for this essay: what unique challenges emerge when teaching a theologically-based course in an international classroom setting while utilizing a translator?

### **Introduction: English Language as an *Invasive Species***

The overwhelming majority of residents in Haiti speak Haitian Creole as their primary language (Spears & Carole, 2010, p. 1). Yet, despite popular and political

efforts to the contrary, the language of education in Haiti is still predominantly French. As noted by Locher (2010), “Probably not a single student in Haiti has ever been taught exclusively according to the reform plans” (p. 179), a reference to the Bernard Reform of 1979, which granted permission to local schools to provide education in the native language, Haitian Creole, followed by education in French in the later elementary grades.

Haitian Creole is the primary language used within the classrooms of Emmaus Biblical Seminary in an effort to provide an accessible education for a wide population. But French is also widely spoken since the students have been educated in the Haitian system that offers much educational instruction in that language as well. And, due to the close proximity to the Dominican Republic, many students are able to speak Spanish. Therefore, many students arrive at the campus with the ability to speak Haitian Creole, French, and Spanish; on top of these languages, students are required to learn English in order to communicate with external/visiting instructors. During their first year of studies, students are required to complete several hours of English instruction as part of a formal EFL (English as a Foreign Language) program.

In order to conceptualize the role that this kind of introduction of a foreign language plays in the classroom, environmental studies can assist in helping to consider English as an *invasive species* within the Haitian classroom. Much like the zebra mussels that have arrived in the Great Lakes region in the United States, the introduction of English has permanently altered the ecology of the classrooms at Emmaus Biblical Seminary. But in the case of the classroom, it is the communicative ecology that has been disrupted as opposed to the environmental ecology. A position that privileges the experiential aspects of the communicative environment recognizes that this introduction cannot be reduced to a simple equation such as *Haitian Creole plus English equals new classroom*. In such a case, the entire ecology of the classroom has been reset and is permanently altered, thus creating a new communicative, or classroom, environment. When the classroom is occupied by an English-speaking instructor, a translator, and a non-native language—English—the classroom becomes something greater than the sum of its parts.

Such an ecology-based approach issues an alternative way of thinking about classroom translation, interpretation, and the study of human communication. My own experience within a Haitian classroom has been as an American visiting professor teaching in conjunction with a Haitian Creole interpreter, an experience that has greatly challenged my own understandings of communication, language and education and continues to provide insight into my role as instructor in an international classroom. Placing the focus of attention on the communicative dynamics of the international classroom invites specific conversation about the study of philosophy of communication and communication ethics, two closely related fields within the academic discipline of communication. By way of a very brief introduction, one way of distinguishing between these two areas of study is to consider a particular communication ethic as an applied philosophy of communication; in other words, a philosophy of communication precedes the communication ethic that emerges from that particular philosophy of communication.

### **Developing a Philosophy of Communication for an International Classroom**

An instructor working from a particular philosophy of communication demonstrates ethical thought by giving full consideration to the implications brought about by taking action based upon a given philosophy of communication. The following section delineates a philosophy of communication that privileges the experiential aspect of human communication understood as an event, as opposed to merely a process. These coordinates form a philosophy of communication that provides a context to explore the communication ethics of the Visiting Professor program at Emmaus Biblical Seminary, thus allowing a conversation about communication ethics in an international context to emerge.

Although admittedly outdated, Michael J. Reddy's (1979) delineation of the *conduit metaphor* provides a helpful starting point for bringing the scholarly study of communication into academic examinations of translation and interpretation. The conduit model works from a perspective that focuses upon the

translator as a simple conveyor of information as opposed to a vital part of the communicative environment. When working from a perspective consistent with the conduit model, the translator him- or herself is merely the medium, or the means by which information is conveyed. Although the theory behind this approach has been widely critiqued, in practice this model is still used in many contexts, including international classroom settings. A much more desirable approach is proposed by Cecilia Wadensjö (1999), who situates Reddy's work within a larger conversation about various theories of translation and interpretation. Wadensjö (1999) identifies the conduit model as a monologic approach to understanding translation and interpretation and suggests that a dialogic approach is much preferred. A dialogic approach, according to Bot and Verrept (2013), is "based upon the idea that the meaning of words and expressions is partially formed in the interaction between people" (p. 120). In a dialogic context the interpreter serves as much more than merely a conveyor of information; in fact, "the interpreter is part of the entire system of constructing meaning" (Bot & Verrept, 2013, p. 120).

A helpful response to the conduit metaphor emerging from the communication discipline is found within the work of Frank J. Macke (2010), who considers the conduit model to represent an information science approach to understanding the study of communication, as opposed to one that emphasizes the experiential aspect of human communication. Macke, in part, builds his critique upon the etymology of the word *communication*: "To be in communication is etymologically consonant with being in *communion*, with feeling *in common*" (2010, p. 37; emphasis in original). But, too often, suggests Macke (2010), communication is defined in terms of information theory, which, in the case of classroom translation, suggests that the interpreter is nothing more than the conduit through which information travels. "Simply, 'commerce' and 'communicate' do not issue from the same set of roots." Instead, communication is "a word having deep roots in the West, a word whose meaning is tied to the very notion of 'community'" (Macke, 2010, p. 47). An understanding driven by a commitment to commerce—information theory—is in opposition to one that

emphasizes human embodiment and experience—community; communion; in common.

The distinction between translation and interpreting often found within the literature of contemporary translation studies speaks directly to this point. The framework of this essay represents an understanding of translation and interpretation in which translation is used as an umbrella term to describe two kinds of mediation or transfers; one via the spoken word—usually referred to as interpreting—and one via the written word, a much more linear exchange of information. Interpreting within a classroom setting recognizes the potential for a communicative event to occur while a single reader of a text is much closer to a communicative process. The unique cultural and religious history of Haiti provides a fitting context to explore the oral dynamics of a classroom setting. Within his essay exploring the communicative implications of Haitian Vodou, Sleasman (in press) states that “Human life, when fully embraced and lived, has much more in common with a communicative *event*, as opposed to a process” (emphasis in the original). While this point may be obvious to some, it is worth noting that we are only a few decades removed from opposing positions receiving theoretical justification and defense. Sleasman’s study reveals how the experience of human communication pushes one beyond self-expression and arrives at some level of shared meaning with all those involved. Understood in this way, oral expression is vital to human communication, but it is more than an exchange of information or ideas; it involves the intangible emotions that accompany the presence of another person and often transcends the mere words that are used.

The uniqueness of the spoken versus written word is central to the work of Walter Ong (2000; 2012), a Jesuit priest as well as scholar, who provides documentation of how the emergence of oral societies predates a culture built around the written word. Ong chronicles that the changes which occurred in Western society as a commitment to oral culture gave way to a society dominated by a print-based mentality. As this transition slowly took place over 2500 years (Ong, 2012), the emergence of print culture and subsequent change from oral to visual perception also gave rise to modern science. Some of the basic differences can be found in how one thinks. For example, in a culture of primary orality,

communication tends to be formulaic, grammatically straightforward, practical, dramatic, empathetic, participatory, situational, and not abstract—because the information can only be remembered, not stored. A culture dominated by print is often linear and logical and many times in direct conflict with the principles held by those who work from a perspective informed by a commitment to orality.

When viewing its culture through the lens of Ong's orality framework, Haiti can most accurately be described as an oral culture (Plaisir, 2010). Haiti has never known widespread reading literacy and therefore can trace its communicative lineage to one that predates the dominance of the written word. Many of the characteristics found within a culture dominated by print, such as linear thinking and the logical construction of arguments, are lacking in much of Haitian culture. While this could lead one to the conclusion that Haiti is *out of touch* with the contemporary era, it is worth noting that orality is consistent with the larger portion of human history since, historically, human beings learned to interact with others through the spoken word prior to the written word. We also see this biologically in which children learn to speak before reading or writing. Unfortunately, as will be explored in more detail later in this essay, the experience of a typical Haitian student is not consistent with the oral culture that he or she experiences outside of the classroom. Despite the effort to reform the educational system, the elementary and high schools in Haiti are structured upon a linear learning model that has its roots in the French colonialist era and is in direct contrast with the oral culture found in the Afrocentric roots of the overwhelming majority of Haitians. Further exploration of this sociolinguistic component of the Haitian educational experience will potentially enrich the classroom by providing a better understanding of the role of language and learning in the life of a typical Haitian student.

As a side note, Ong took special interest in the communication of God's Word; a point especially relevant to translation issues arising in a theological seminary in an oral context. Ong (2000, pp. 190-191) took comfort from the notion that

God entered into human history in a special fashion at the precise time when psychological structures assured that his entrance would have greatest opportunity to endure and flower. To assure maximum presence through history, the Word came in the ripeness of time, when a sense of the oral was still dominant and when at the same time the alphabet could give divine revelation among men a new kind of endurance and stability. . . . [D]ivine revelation let down its roots into human culture and consciousness after the alphabet was devised but before print had overgrown major oral structures and before our electronic culture further obscured the basic nature of the word.

In a classroom environment informed by a linear and logical mindset, the classroom interpreter risks being seen as little more than a conveyor of information whose primary task is to assist in the exchange of ideas between the instructor and students. Within an oral culture such as Haiti, an interpreter who is part of the experience of the classroom is a much greater asset to the students and the instructor of course, because the classroom experience is more like the *out of classroom* experiences of the students.

## **A Communication Ethic of an International Classroom: A Visiting Professor Program as Case Study**

This essay reframes classroom-related translation by focusing less upon the *process* of translation and more upon the communicative *event* that is taking place within the classroom itself; in such an environment the interpreter no longer fits neatly into the traditional information exchange model of sender and receiver. The interpreter is not merely a conduit through which information passes but a vital part of the learning environment. An experiential understanding of human communication makes much sense within an oral culture. In fact, such an approach honors the fluidity and give and take of an oral exchange. The following section applies the previously outlined philosophy of communication to the Visiting Professor program at Emmaus Biblical Seminary in an effort to better



understand the specific dynamics that emerge in a multilingual international classroom setting.

As is noted in the heading of this section, the following observations are offered as one way of understanding an international classroom context; hence, the term “communication ethic” as opposed to “communication ethics.” It is expected that there will be others who work with similar ideas and draw alternative conclusions. One of the goals of this essay is to stimulate conversation among those who study philosophy of communication and communication ethics in order to better understand the uniqueness of the international classroom environment and, thus, assist in creating more positive classroom experiences for students. There is great value in working with a classroom interpreter in an international classroom setting, and I focus on what could make such an environment more effective. In order to accomplish this goal, I break the following section down into three separate discussions. First, I explore the role of the students in this classroom environment and then follow with an exploration of the implications for the visiting professor’s teaching in this program. Finally, I conclude with a brief overview of some implications for those who desire to be translators and interpreters in such a context.

When I first began examining the role of a translator in an international classroom setting, I was unfamiliar with the literature exploring Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). One of my assumptions during my initial teaching experience was that students would have a negative impression of the Visiting Professor program simply because they would tire of the constant interaction between the instructor and interpreter. This was by no means the case. My discoveries were consistent with the wider CLIL literature in which many of the students were simultaneously learning English in addition to their regular course-work. This dynamic interplay between the instructor and interpreter provides an opportunity for non-English speakers to learn the English language as they learn the course content. Becoming aware of this point provided a push towards my understanding of the experiential nature of human communication as opposed to viewing it as strictly a process. Much research has been conducted on ESL, EFL, and ELL (English Language Learners) programs for speakers of

Haitian Creole (see Spears and Joseph, 2010, for a full treatment of the subject). A qualitative analysis and comparison of a single institution offering EFL programs along with in-class interpreters would provide ample data to move forward with a broader perspective of issues related to translation and interpretation in Haitian multilingual classrooms.

But, to fully embrace this experiential aspect of education, it is not only the instructors who need to adjust. According to Joseph (2010),

The Haitian student is used to a much more rigid classroom setting than that found in the U.S. They are not accustomed to being asked to participate in classroom discussions or to form their own opinions and express them in class. They are used to classrooms in which the instructors talk “at” students and require vastly more memorization. (p. 240)

This cooperative effort to re-envision the classroom is a second area of consideration and leads into a discussion of the role that instructors play in translation and interpretation. Many faculty members still work from an educational perspective that places the instructor as the main focus of the classroom and the students as recipients of the wisdom of the person in charge of the classroom. Higher education has been challenged for many years now to move from a teacher-centered classroom to a student-centered classroom. This model was called the “banking,” or transmissionist, model of education by Paulo Freire (1968) in *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Faculty must be willing to reconsider their role in an international multilingual classroom and be open to embracing the communicative event as opposed to just the process of education. This de-centers the faculty member as the primary focus and increases the role and importance of the interpreter. This is not to suggest that the interpreter becomes the instructor. In fact, this reconfiguration requires that the instructor be in command of the course material and have a clear vision for the classroom lectures and activities.

Embracing the experiential aspect of the classroom raises questions about the minimal amount of Haitian Creole that visiting professors should know. During my first semester teaching as a visiting professor, I did not have any prior

exposure to Haitian Creole and was entirely dependent upon my interpreter. When a student would speak, I would listen intently to the interpreter and not always focus upon the student. One day, in an effort to speak my language, a student was talking to me in English. But, because I was so tuned into listening for the interpreter, I completely missed what he was saying until he repeated for a third time, "Do you understand me?" My ethical obligation to listen to my students was lost because I was so focused on hearing the interpreter. But there is an inherent challenge in learning a language when one does not speak the language on a consistent basis. Due to the nature of the Visiting Professor program, many faculty members are on campus for only two weeks every few years, a time frame that works against having any sustained opportunity to interact with speakers of Haitian Creole on an ongoing basis. A question for further study is how much Haitian Creole should an instructor speak in order to honor the native language of the students? As noted above, many students improve their English language skills by listening to the give and take of the instructor and interpreter. So, if the visiting professors were able to teach fully in Haitian Creole, it could perhaps minimize the value of the intensive classes for the students, since so many are learning English as they are learning the course content from the visiting professors. But should a minimum amount of Haitian Creole be expected from visiting professors? Could Emmaus Biblical Seminary produce an online resource that could be accessed prior to the arrival of a visiting professor? Is it possible for an instructor to be fully present to students without having at least a basic awareness and appreciation of the students' native tongue? Perhaps a guiding point here is that it is not as much about knowing the language as it is in honoring the native language of the students and making an effort to appreciate the differences between faculty and student.

In addition to the practical considerations of learning the students' language, it would also be helpful for the visiting professors to have some introduction to the sociolinguistic aspects of Haitian culture, especially as it pertains to the theological implications. Zéphir (2010) writes, "The unequal status of French and Haitian Creole in Haiti has been loosely described with the term *diglossia*" (p. 60). Until quite recently, the official language of Haiti was French,

despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of Haitian citizens speak Haitian Creole. This has practical implications for the professional communication of the students. For example, there are strong cultural assumptions made about a pastor who presents a sermon in French as opposed to Creole. Joseph (2010) writes, “Stafford (1987) reports that the churches were the first institutions in Haiti to use Haitian Creole, even before the Bernard Reform, in order to better communicate with the faithful” (p. 236). Following the example of the New Testament authors who wrote in Koine Greek, the language of the common person, the Christian Church in Haiti could, through the use of Haitian Creole, embrace the language of the people and spread the message of the Scriptures so that it is most easily understood by the widest audience. As these dynamics are not unique to Haiti, they provide an opportunity to explore this type of diglossia in relation to international professional communication in general and give consideration to the unique theological concerns at other institutions serving a mission to that of Emmaus Biblical Seminary.

Understanding the diglossic nature of Haitian language and culture is not only necessary for the visiting professors at Emmaus Biblical Seminary. In fact, part of the educational process of Haitian students could also be to learn about the language dynamics of their own culture. I have taught the Homiletics course and have begun including a section that explores the basic communicative dynamics of related in Table 1 on page 141.

The column labeled “Media Age” represents the historical time period in which a particular development pertaining to human communication and language emerged. For example, in the Mimetic Age, human beings communicated via sounds and relied upon the ear as the primary sense receptor. The Visiting Professor program at Emmaus Biblical Seminary provides a wonderful opportunity for students and faculty but, in order to become more effective, the program requires sustained effort to stay current with research and practice related to contemporary translation and interpretation studies.

The final component of this program that requires analysis is interpreter training. Each area of translation requires training suited for that particular area.

**Table 1***Basic Communicative Dynamics*

<b>Media Age</b>	<b>Key Development</b>	<b>Dominant Medium</b>	<b>Dominant Sense Receptor</b>
Mimetic (Mimic) Age	—	sounds	ear / hearing
Tribal Age	language	speech	ear / hearing
Literate Age	phonetic alphabet	writing	eye / seeing
Print Age	printing press	print media	eye / seeing
Electronic Age	electric telegraph	electronic media	ear / hearing
Digital Age	computer	digital media	ear and touch

For example, ample research has been conducted on programs related to medical translation (e.g., Ballantyne, Yang, & Boon, 2013; Stapleton, Murphy, & Kildea, 2103) and educational translation (Wei, Xu, & Zhu, 2011). But there is a dearth of research related to theological contexts in terms of live translation and interpretation. Due to the importance of the written text of the Christian Scriptures, much focus has been placed upon written translation, but very little has taken place in terms of oral translation and none has occurred giving consideration to theological translation in an international classroom setting. Therefore, the question about the training that the interpreters at Emmaus Biblical Seminary are receiving prior to entering the classroom comes to the foreground. I have worked with interpreters who were trained as medical translators and interpreters who were bilingual but did not receive any specific translation training. This changes the dynamics of the classroom since medical translation depends upon precision by the interpreter while classrooms provide more freedom in understanding and interaction between instructor and students. A medical inaccuracy may cause

literally life and death situations for some stakeholders; on the contrary, although much information can be lost in a classroom, the stakes are not nearly as high. But the concerns raised earlier about Emmaus Biblical Seminary are also consistent with other translation fields; although writing about health care contexts, Watermeyer (2011) suggests that “The conduit model continues to be promoted as the ideal model of interpreting” (p. 72) despite its proven ineffectiveness.

To summarize, the multilingual international classroom is a unique communicative environment providing an opportunity for non-English speakers to learn the English language *as* they learn the course content (i.e., CLIL). To reconfigure this classroom-related translation experience, we can focus less upon the process of translation and more upon the event that is taking place in the classroom with the interaction of the students, instructor, and interpreter. As previously noted, the interpreter does not fit neatly into the sender/receiver model. Reconfiguring the model raises questions about the communicative event as opposed to the communicative process. The issue is complicated because the history and culture of Haiti is consistent with Walter Ong’s exploration of *oral* cultures in *Orality and literacy*. Since much of the developing world has strong roots in the Afrocentric oral tradition, a Haitian classroom provides an excellent opportunity to explore international classroom translation in an oral culture.

## Conclusion

Many professional contexts, such as those found within the medical field, have developed thorough training materials related to translation and interpretation. In contrast, classroom translation in a theological context is a distinct genre of translation, yet it lacks extensive theoretical interrogation or exploration. One goal of this essay is to enter the conversation and establish a foundation for further research by raising both practical and ethical questions for future consideration. The field of communication is rich with resources and scholars who can contribute to and expand on the growing research about professional translation in an international setting. For example, as noted previously, Frank J. Macke’s (2010) work provides theoretical support for the importance of a classroom

*interpreter* who goes beyond simply translating text and contributes to the overall classroom experience of the instructor and students. Walter J. Ong (2000; 2012) provides an extensive exploration of the difference between an oral and a print-based culture, a distinction that is especially helpful in countries like Haiti, where primary orality is still present. More specifically, Brent C. Sleasman (in press) explores the unique religious and communicative dynamics of Haitian culture and provides a point of connection between orality, interpretation and philosophy of communication in Haiti.

Among other resources and by way of conclusion, mention should be made of the International Orality Network (<http://www.oralty.net/>), which provides materials written from an explicitly Christian orientation for those who are interested in connecting with people living in predominantly oral cultures. The website provides a searchable database of resources and events that provide opportunities to learn more about implicit and explicit issues raised in this essay. For example, when searching for “interpreting,” one finds a workshop specifically designed for those who are interested in interpreting in a multilingual Christian worship service. Searching for “classroom” leads one to an essay written by Phil Thornton (2014) exploring “Constructivism, cross-cultural teaching, and orality.” Resources such as these exist at the intersection of human communication, theology, and translation. By giving fuller consideration to the issues raised within this essay, students can benefit from a more philosophically grounded, and ultimately more ethical, classroom experience. ■

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