

## Tower of Babel

Bia Peine and Daltony Nóbrega

*An allegorical version of the birth of translation*

One of the most interesting stories thought up by man takes place in Babylon some time after the Great Flood. As the story goes, Noah's descendents were obsessed with grandeur and decided to build a gigantic building, the "Empire State" of its time. Never had anyone created something so tall, so ambitious. We today know this construction by its Biblical name: Tower of Babel.

The venture's biggest problem was the constructors' intent. They wanted the building to reach the skies so they could pay tribute to and adore those strange gods that abounded in those days. Up in the heavens, Jehovah, God of the Hebrews, watched all of this and decided that this was an unacceptable challenge, far too much boldness by the humans. That was when he decided to adopt a drastic attitude. To punish mankind, he mixed the different dialects and created dozens of languages so that some could no longer understand what others said.

Said and done. No one could communicate in Babel any more. In the beginning, Noah's family must have tried to instruct the foremen. They probably acted like they had understood, although just to avoid losing their jobs. Typical of public servants. The foremen returned to the construction site and gave random orders to the slaves, but nobody obeyed, not even when faced with the whip, simply because it was impossible to understand what they were saying. After some time, the foremen didn't even try to give orders and, to save time, just pulled out their whips. A much more practical approach. Yelling, beating, total chaos. This is probably when certain peoples learned the habit of communicating by yelling.

Needless to say, the construction work was abandoned and the tower was left only half finished. If all this had happened today, Noah's family would have contracted McCann Erickson and made loads of money selling office space in the "largest unfinished building in the world, the Tow of Bab."

On a more serious note, this fascinating story can be found in the Bible, Book of Genesis, and has at least one important purpose: people believe it to be true. Since questioning the supernatural has always been prohibited or dangerous — Salman Rushdie is a clear witness to that —, many people and generations have relied on this story to explain the enormous diversity of languages.

However, instead of knowing why so many different languages exist in the world, what is important for us is to analyze the impact of the event on business in the region and study the possible consequences of this mess of languages. The contractor responsible for the Tow of Bab would obviously go bankrupt or rip off the buyers, but what about the rest? With this in mind, prepare to join us on a journey. Go back in time and space, imagine that you are in Babylon and ask yourself: in a situation like this, after the scare had passed and the dust settled, what would a business-oriented person do?

Let's think about this a bit. How to take advantage of this chaos? We believe that the best way to take hold of the situation was undoubtedly to create the first translation company. It would be a grand idea and just like that, divine intervention would result in a new profession. Thank God, most literally.

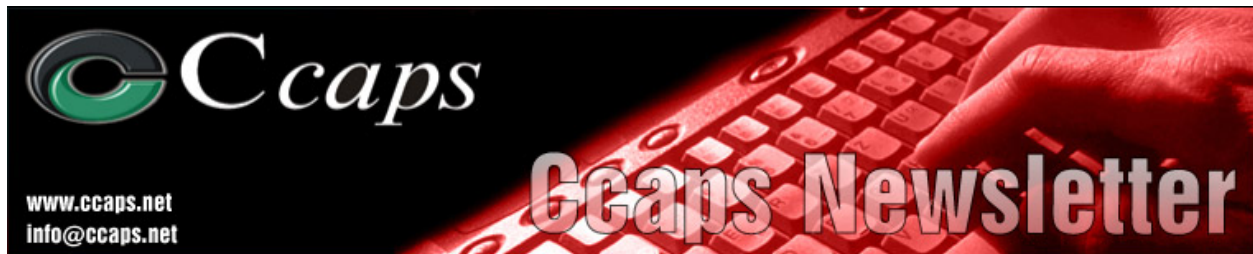


Tower of Babel, by Pieter Bruegel



Tow of Bab, contemporary high-end real estate venture

Genesis does not go into details, but everything indicates that this company existed. Nothing would be more logical, more obvious or more expected since mankind always discovers a way to use adversity in its favor. Therefore, we can make some assumptions and create our own continuation to the story: Tower of Babel II, the Mission. At least theoretically, it could have happened as follows.



Amidst that terrible chaos, everyone became desperate to find others that spoke the same language. One of them, very calm and wise, decided that instead of simply complaining and pulling out his hair, he would do something. If he did not actually become a translator, at least he returned the order and became a pioneer in the field. Extremely organized, he catalogued everyone and classified people based on the language they spoke. He then grouped and created the terms Italian, English, French, Jewish, Spanish – and even those peoples of the New World that had not yet been discovered: Brazilians, Americans, etc. (Since we invented this part of this story, we can insert whoever we want, right?)

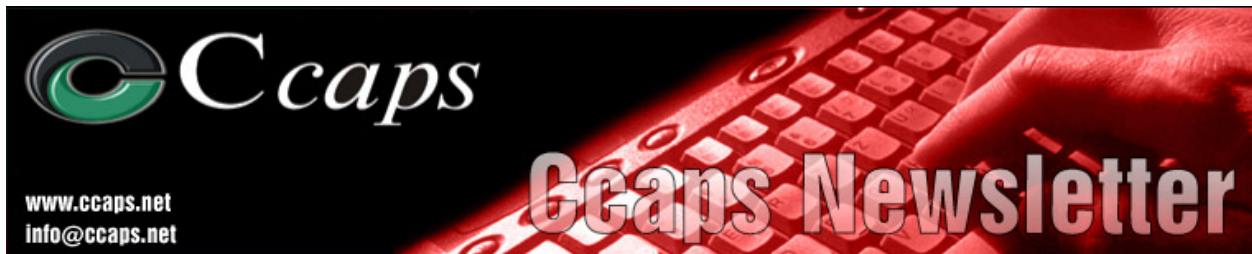
Then the groups got together, generating a type of DisUnited Nations, or “DisUN.” Nevertheless, because some could not understand others (people are incorrigible, regardless of the period in history), they left, each one going to their respective corners.

Not everyone however. Many of them thought it all extremely interesting and decided to stay there. Today, these individuals would be called entrepreneurs, top executives, men and women of vision. Through all that confusion, they saw a new business opportunity. Thus, new vocations began to surface based on these new “nationalities.”

The Greek man, who was the most cultured in the city, was responsible for the philosophical aspects and created the first rules. The Italian, quite ingenious and communicative, gathered a large group of scholars together who then delved into the subject and became the first translators in history. The French man, who was very Cartesian, thought it absurd that so much power be given to a bunch of scatterbrained scholars and decided to create a control group — these became the proofreaders. The English man soon saw that the translators and proofreaders were one and the same and calculated that someone neutral was required to coordinate the service: he invented the project manager. The Arab man took care of the administration and the clever Jewish man took care of the finances. The Brazilian man, who had just arrived and was only passing through, watched everything from a distance and tried to think of a way to do the same thing with fewer resources.

While all this happened, the American man quietly watched every step, every decision. One day, when he decided that everything was finally working smoothly, he called the group together for a meeting, made an irrefutable offer and hired everyone. To complete the team, he called in a German scientist who became responsible for creating equipment to facilitate the operations. Some years later, the American exported the software, hardware and process to the entire world. He became a billionaire.

Do you really think this story is over? You’re wrong. Years later, a businessman presented the market with a charming miniature of the equipment. He was Japanese, of course. He became wealthy off the venture and lived in luxury for many years, until one day his Chinese neighbor, who had several children, put them all to work and created a much less expensive generic version.



And there was still one extremely important person missing from the translation company: The theoretician. Perhaps this deserves explanation: the theoretician is that guy who could specialize in some function but is smarter than most and knows that talking about work is much better than actually working — precisely what we are doing now! The theoretician carefully observes the service of others and may even try it a bit (just to see what it is like), learns how things work and then introduces some random theory. That is what happened with our Tower of Babel II. He appeared, observed everything, created a theory and came up with a flashy name: debabelization. Based on this, he published several books, became famous and gave a series of lectures all over the world, diffusing the need to “debabelize” communications.

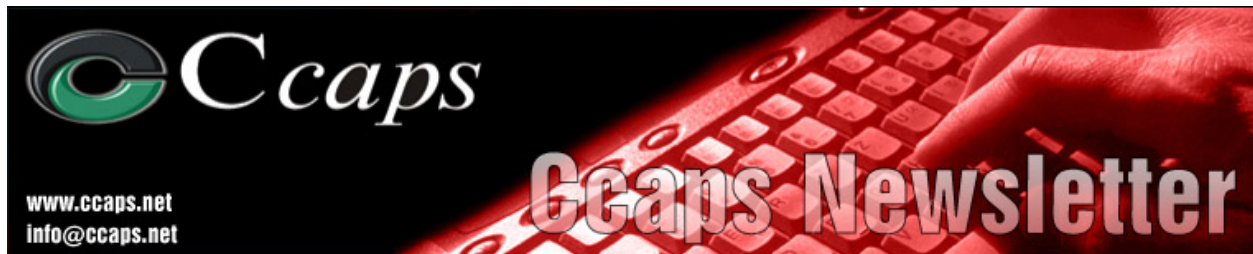
By this, he meant that if the world truly wished to communicate, everyone would need to speak the same language. The thesis was good, but not even a bit realistic, at least for that period. “Speaking the same language” was an increasingly difficult dream to attain because the groups that left Babylon went about discovering new places, crossing oceans and spreading out across the planet. These peoples went to live in increasingly distant regions and it was not rare for them to become completely isolated from one another.

Each human group then made its own discoveries and created new words that the other groups had never heard of. After all, how could a Tuareg, in the heat of the Sahara Desert, imagine what an igloo was? And could an Eskimo, with all that cold, invent the air conditioner? Obviously not. For this and other reasons, the differences between languages continued to grow.

Leaving the universe of fiction and returning to the real world, we see that in the past, without constant and efficient communication between countries, any word created by one group took a long time to reach the others. Worse than this, the word changed as it traveled around the world: the Latin word “tavola” became *tábua*, *tavla*, *table* (with different pronunciations in English and French). This continues to happen today, as words travel from one language to another now more than ever. Some even reach extremes: they are created in one language, migrate to another and then return home modified.

A good example of this is another Latin word, “delere,” which means “erase” and was assimilated by the English language as “delete.” Portuguese is a Neo-Latin language and currently has a corresponding verb (“delir”), but nobody uses it. However, due to the heavy North American influence in the IT area, it is common to hear Brazilians saying that they will “deletar” a file.

Accordingly, the current scenario shows an entirely unique, first-of-its-kind situation. Technology has taken leaps and bounds over recent years and has generated a level of communication that would have been impossible a century ago. Never in history was it so easy to talk to someone at the other end of the planet. And that’s not all! Today, you can see and hear the person with whom you are talking, exchange documents electronically, learn about virtually anything that has happened anywhere on Earth and study any subject that has been addressed on the Internet.



Distance is no longer a problem. Time zones are no longer a problem. The difficulty of transmitting information between different places and cultures is a thing of the past. Only one barrier is still difficult to overcome: that of language. Hence the increasing importance of translation professionals.

It is quite true that there is a certain degree of approximation between languages from all over the world. There are those who say that one day, everything will boil down to a single language, a mixture of all the others. In fact, we could even start now and create a new language: gerporfnejachinglish. We are already accepting donations and sponsorship to begin research.

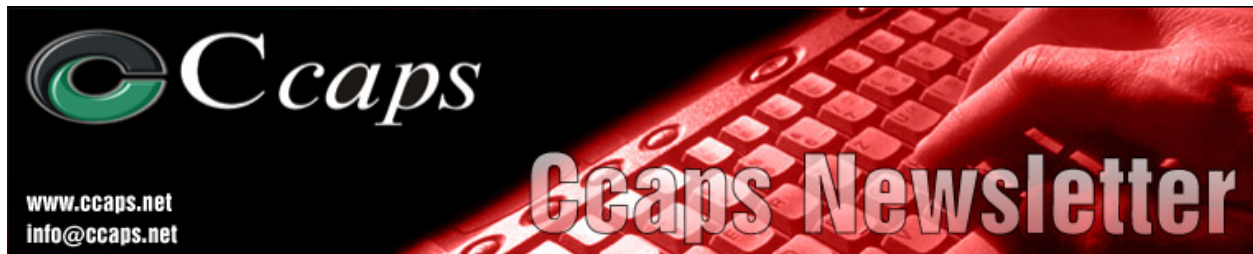
With this growing approximation between languages, each one imports terms from the others like never before. All of the smart solutions of a certain language are immediately adopted by the others. Suddenly, without losing any time. And without the least formality. Of course there are exaggerations, but there is generally a very healthy mutual contamination process unfolding before our eyes.

Certainly if a common object like a chair were created today, it would not have a dozen names in a dozen languages. It would not be chair, *cadeira*, *chaise*, *sedia*, *silla*, *stol*, *stuhl*. It would simply be chair, with slight variations.

This provides a stunningly clear portrait of our industry's importance today. Translation, localization, internationalization, regionalization, or whatever name it goes by, has become a fundamental part of the so-called "globalization" process, facilitating and streamlining the exchange of knowledge. The industry has become so important that people realized that the very concept of "translation" was outdated and no longer sufficient to define the process. Even if it were not outdated, it had been worn by hundreds of years of use and the industry needed to do something to demonstrate that it had also evolved and improved.

Based on this thinking, "translate" was heavily associated with the idea of simply changing words and phrases to another language, without any commitment to the fluency and meaning of the original. More recently, it became crucial to change the focus. It was necessary to reinvent the profession. After all, we are the professionals of a new day and age.

Texts today must be treated like any other modern product: instead of simply transporting them from one place to the next, we now need to deliver them to the public in customized packaging. The era of canned, impersonal translations is over. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, translating requires extra effort, more research and more knowledge. The idea now is to capture, understand what was said in the original language and interpret, adapt to the target language and region. The verb "translate" gave way to the verb "localize," seen from a new angle. The text should appear as if it had been originally written in the target language.



The Roman philosopher Cicero said something like: "It is not enough for Caesar's wife to be honest; she must look honest." The same thing applies to modern translation. It is not good enough for it to be in Portuguese; it has to look like Portuguese. It is not enough for it to be in English, it must look like English.

High tech translators do not use a pencil, pen, eraser, paper or typewriter. They use computers. Translators do not work alone. Rather, broadband access connects them to a global computer network. There are still printed dictionaries and grammar books (so last century!), but industry professionals also use an infinite number of electronic information sources. Twenty-first century translators do not translate; they localize.

Truth be told: a good part of the incredible information exchange that currently exists is only possible because a group of scatterbrained scholars (e.g. all of us) works tirelessly worldwide to bring the ideas of one group to another, from one language to another, from one people to another. Minute after minute, day after day, somewhere on the planet, there are always thousands of translators and proofreaders working hard to, let's put it this way, debabelize the world.

*Bia Peine has studied several different subjects throughout her life: a bit of architecture, a bit of languages, computer programming and other topics. Daltony Nóbrega has also dabbled here and there, in computers, administration, literature, music... Both have worked in theatre and television. Nóbrega created programs at TV Globo, the largest television network in Brazil. The couple developed – and Peine directed – the Internet Department for Band, another one of Brazil's major television networks. Plans for the future: when they grow up, both want to be translators.*