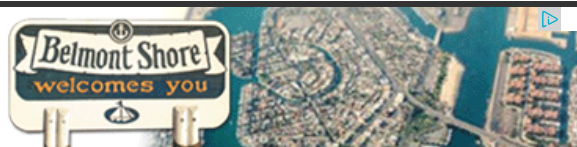


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Can an algorithm be racist?

MARISSA MOORMAN | SEPTEMBER 29TH, 2014



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Can an algorithm be racist? Google’s translator (the new 2.0 version) works **statistically**. That Connectivist article (at the link) calls it “the great equalizer.” Unlike the first iteration that was based on the input of grammar rules and vocabulary lists, this one draws from a vast pool of actual texts to produce a softer, truer translation. But sometimes, it gets it just plain wrong. And just plain racist.

Last week I played intermediary between some friends, distanced by geography and time. At least on my end, it all happened on my phone but nary a call was made. I sent and received texts and IMs on Facebook, cut and pasted messages, and used e-mail, all in the palm of my hand. But the exchange spanned a world of relations and contacts dense with transatlantic history and mediations. That might have been nothing but a quaint curiosity, another small world moment, had it not been for Google translate.

Having completed the connection between the old friends, I thought my task was done. Then this arrived: “Funny, I got this message from JM and see how google translated it.”

The original message:

Olá carissimo amigo

Espero que esteja tudo bem
contigo manos e pais
Eu e minha irmã estamos bem.
Gostaria de manter contacto com vocês
Abraço forte

Google translation:

Hello friend carissimo
 I hope all is well with you
 niggas and parents
 My sister and I are fine.
 I would like to keep in touch with you
 Big hug

What happened? Google translate pulled from the argot of Brazilian hip hop. "Manos" means "brothers" (or brothers and sisters) in Portuguese and Angolan Portuguese. In Brazilian Portuguese it means "bro" and "nigga," according to scholar Derek Pardue who studies Brazilian hip hop and Portuguese hiphop (particularly Cape Verdian rappers). They nab it from US hip hop in an act of Pan-African identification. Somehow, that falls out of the translated message.

If you type in just "manos" you get "brothers" or "bros" so it is something about the punctuation or the combination with "contigo manos e pais" (the familiar form of "you" combined with brothers and sisters and parents). Nonetheless. Strangely, it left "carissimo" untranslated. I would have translated it as "very dear." Clearly, it's not Mikolo's version of Google Translate. But what do I know?

I know that although Portuguese originated in Portugal, the country with the current largest number of speakers is Brazil. Brazil has the world's largest African descended population (we glossed **race** in Brazil during the **World Cup** in June 2014). Brazil dominates this relationship with Portugal economically, culturally with music and television production, and linguistically, thanks to the **new orthography**, signed in 1990 between Portugal and Brazil but slowly instituted since 2008 in Portugal and 2009 in Brazil (and unevenly in other Portuguese speaking countries).

Large populations of speakers exist in Portugal's other former colonies: Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea-Buissau, Moçambique, São Tome and Príncipe (known as the **PALOPS**) and, to a lesser extent, East Timor, Goa, and Macau. The new orthography is, among other things, meant to facilitate internet searches between people who speak the same language. But what happens with translation? Translation isn't just linguistic, it's cultural too, sometimes generational. Even when we speak the same language, *we don't speak the same language*. My American friend understood. Our Angolan friend would have been aghast but would have figured out what happened. But what if the person who received the message didn't speak any Portuguese? What if he didn't know the person sending the message?

I know machine racism when I see it. However "unintentional" a computer program may be. People wrote the program. How can they learn to account for slang, cultural difference, linguistic variation, sedimented history? Google might be fast but it isn't savvy. It isn't the great equalizer, it only reproduces the inequalities we already know too well.

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Marissa Moorman, based at Indiana University, is a historian of Southern Africa.

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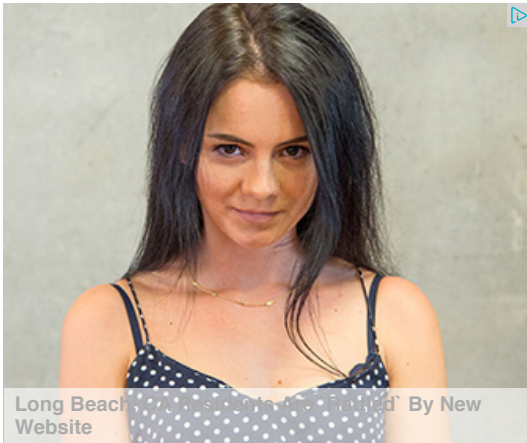
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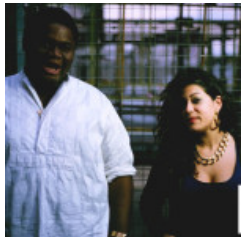
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One thought on "Can an algorithm be racist?"

1. Julia Haussmann on September 29, 2014 at 3:31 pm said:
It is not just the algorithms; it is the numbers. It starts with the numbers. Take a common

neighbours (except "those Nigerians") 13 May 2014 at 9:00 am



#Breaking: New York Times discovers African artists use the Internets 17 Jan 2014 at 9:00 am



APARTHEID'S FINAL TRICK 6 Oct 2009 at 2:19 pm



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Made in China 3 Jun 2010 at 8:00 am



The Gautrain 14 Jun 2011 at 10:00 am



Consuming Africa (at Christmas Time) 24 Dec 2012 at 10:00 am

sequence like 4 8 15 16 23 42 and convert it to text, study it and it is right there before you.

If blame has to be assigned for the racism in this case I think those Cabo Verde rappers are the real culprits. Translate it instead to say, galician and it comes out right.

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