**Collaboration in the present and in the future: where do we go from here?**

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Abstract

The concept of collaboration has characterised translation processes throughout history and in the field of Translation Studies it has been linked to other fundamental concepts, such as the visibility of translation agents. Visibility and collaboration have not been regarded as polar opposites, but have often proven to be incompatible when looking at the past. The past allows us to better understand the present and act to bring about cultural change. This is the case with translation metaphors, which have hitherto focused on the individual translator, but which we can now conceive of in a plural and collaborative form. From the past we have turned to the present and a future in which translation is increasingly driven by technology, with advantages and disadvantages for translators, who cannot afford to ignore technological progress applied to translation. Moreover, today's practice can no longer neglect an ecological dimension that embraces the entire world around us. It is precisely from the broader perspective that technologies offer us that it is possible to start thinking about forms of communication, and thus translation, that are broadly collaborative and encompass the human and non-human world.

Keywords: Translation Studies, collaboration, translator’s visibility, digitally assisted translation; translation and ecology

**1. Translator’s (in)visibility as a maker of cultural developments**

Binary oppositions seem to be a fairly regular feature of Translation Studies, as a binary conception is part of an epistemological tradition whose use can be traced throughout the development of the discipline up to the most recent critical positions (Gambier 2018: 19). Important concepts such as visibility and collaboration have not been conceived as a polar opposition, but in my opinion have generated a relationship of mutual incompatibility that has characterised the discipline throughout its history.

Today, the (in)visibility of translators and their work is a controversial issue both professionally and in translation theory. Venuti launched his campaign against translator invisibility by arguing that the theoretical and methodological approach that promotes this model, and thus requires translations to align with the expectations of the target culture, reflects the ethnocentrism of the receiving culture and its reluctance to address cultural difference.

Yet scholars like Coldiron (2012) have argued that historical analysis of aspects of translators' (in)visibility can reveal fundamental socio-cultural changes in which translation processes played a primary role. As an example she showed that the translators and other cultural agents who were responsible for the production of medieval manuscripts did not usually act as individuals, but rather collaborated with each other and shared responsibilities for the realization of cultural products. In this period collaboration in the production of texts (including their translation) enjoyed both visibility and reliability, as Coldiron makes clear:

textual production was radically collaborative and involved many roles and functions […] Specific roles and hierarchies of production came to be established and were announced (and perpetuated) in certain metatextual and paratextual sites in the manuscripts. The articulation of these roles and hierarchies guaranteed, in some sense, the validity and value of the work and the reliability of any given text or copy of the work (ibid.,191).

Thus, the model of visibility, not invisibility, was predominant in medieval texts. It was the exact opposite of the scenario addressed by Venuti in his analyses of the last two centuries, when invisible translators delivered translations that erased the marks of their work. The invisibility model has resulted from, and in turn nurtured, specific cultural values since the Eighteenth century, when the work of art started to be considered the fruit of the author's genius and his (authors were predominantly male) private property.

As early as 1710, Queen Anne's Statute granted copyright to authors, replacing the monopoly system previously granted to printers and publishers. This act fixed copyright for a duration of fourteen years and a protection of twenty-one years for all books published before the Statute was published.[[1]](#footnote-1) The historical correlation between the emergence of the author as a subject of copyright protection at the beginning of the Eighteenth century and the Romantic notion of the creative genius towards the end of the century in Great Britain has been widely acknowledged by literary critics, despite several objections in recent decades (David 2006; Lavik 2014). However, the effect of copyright on the invisibility of translators and especially on their collaborative work has very rarely been considered from a historical perspective.

As long as the main parameter of literary value focuses on the unique talent of an author working alone, which according to Venuti is still the case today, not only translators, but also any form of collaborative work in translation will remain invisible. And yet, Coldiron has demonstrated that the visibility or invisibility of translators are historically dependent. Consequently, just as the latter has been a key concept in the last two centuries, perhaps the visibility of all actors involved in the translation process may become a methodological key to investigating present and future cultural dynamics in Translation Studies.

Today, the visibility of translators and their work has unprecedented potential thanks to the development of digital technologies. In a future that is almost already present, the signs of visibility in terms of the plurality of translators involved in any translation project seem to be moving in the direction of increasing valorisation, driven by the diversification of roles, particularly in on-line translation projects. Moreover, technological progress offers another kind of revaluation of visibility, thanks to a new, flexible type of textuality which can be characterised as postmodern (Coldiron 2015). Today, texts available in electronic format consist of hypertexts incorporating a plurality of links and windows that are often the result of collaborative work. Such textual modes seem to have bypassed the notion of author or translator as individuals, and as a result, translators and their collaborative relationships are bound to become increasingly visible in the near future.

**2. Metaphors of translation and collaboration**

Collaboration in translation occurs when «two or more agents cooperate in some way to produce a translation» (O'Brien 2011, 17). However, as we pointed out earlier, this kind of hybrid, cooperative work has long been neglected by Western culture, which has established a link between the concepts of authorship and ownership of artistic concepts. And if translation has traditionally been regarded as a non-original product, and therefore considered an inferior artistic production, its value risks being further devalued if it is the result of the collaboration of several people, whose individual contributions are lost in an indistinct whole. In the case of collaborative translation, it would be difficult to speak of some kind of translators' copyright. Even the most ardent advocates of translator visibility would struggle to make their case when a potentially unlimited number of translators work together on a single project.

However, recent research in Translation Studies is increasingly offering us a new image of translation as an essentially collaborative act (cfr. Cordingley and Frigau Manning 2017; Folaron 2010; Malmkjaer 2013; O ’Hagan 2013). It now seems taken for granted that the notion of the solitary translator is culturally determined, and that in fact several agents are inevitably involved in the translation process (Bistué 2016). Yet, critics such as St. André (2017: 283) have pointed out that although the work of translators involves a significant amount of collaboration of some kind, today, as in the past, the discourses that characterize the translation process, and in particular the metaphors used to describe it, continue to depict an individual translator.

Metaphors are a fundamental feature of the human capacity to conceptualise one meaning in terms of another and allow us to communicate through analogical processes, enabling us to understand something new in terms of what is more familiar. They are central components of human cognition, as Lakoff and Johnson have argued:

metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language, but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature (1980: 3).

However, it is precisely the ‘metaphors we live by’ that may prove to be an obstacle to reconfiguring translation as a collective process in which different agents cooperate, according to St. André. Referring to Sapir and Whorf's hypothesis (according to which a language largely determines the way we perceive and produce knowledge about the world), this scholar argues that metaphors also represent and thus somehow determine specific views of the translation process (2017: 284). St. André devoted extensive research to analysing some of the most common metaphors used to describe translation processes, and in most cases he found that they depict an individual translator. (St. André 2010, 2014). The examples examined include the translator as matchmaker, tightrope walker, actor or cooking master, all analogies involving single subjects (2017: 285).

Most of these examples, however, including those that may be understood in the singular at first glance, could be reformulated as plural, or collaborative, if we think about them more carefully. An obvious case in point is the widely used metaphor of translation as a bridge between cultures: building a bridge necessarily implies a collaborative process, requiring the cooperation of several participants with different skills. A similar argument could be made for the metaphor of the matchmaker: those working in this field hardly act alone, as the job requires contacts, personal relationships, teamwork and possibly collaboration with other service providers.

If the metaphors traditionally used to describe the translation process have so far visualised a single, isolated translator, they need to be reworked to redefine concepts and produce change. As Pinker has pointed out: «People can not only ignore metaphors, but can question and discount them, and analyze which aspects are applicable and which should be ignored» (2007: 249). These changes are likely to alter our view of the world in the long run, in particular our conceptualisation of the translation process as the product of a single agent.

**3. Collaborative translation in a digital world**

Today the concept of collaboration allows us to rethink fundamental questions about agency in translation. The interaction of different players is a key feature of online digitally assisted translation, especially when a text is produced collaboratively by several translators. The rise and popularity of online translation practices and the networks that have developed through them have attracted the attention of several translation scholars, who have analysed the phenomenon from various perspectives, as Yu (2019: 231) has pointed out:

Whether online translation has been studied under the terminology of user-generated translation (UGT) (O’Hagan 2009), wiki-translation (Cronin 2010), community translation (Kelly, Ray, and DePalma 2011), crowdsourcing translation (McDonough Dolmaya 2012), or volunteer translation (Olohan 2014), partici- pants’ collaborative and interactive endeavor is widely acknowledged (e.g. Munday 2012; Pérez-González 2014). These two seminal features are further accentuated by the frequent use of ‘collaborative translation’ in the latest translation studies (TS) literature (Jiménez- Crespo 2017; Cordingley and Frigau Manning 2017; Neather 2019).

Yet despite the recent popularity of the concept of collaboration in the field of Translation Studies, only very general definitions have emerged, usually leading back to vague notions of ‘working together’ (Zwischenberger 2022: 7).

Zwischenberger (ibid.: 8) has investigated the relationship that online collaborative translation processes enable us to establish with technologies and described it as an ambivalent relationship with the two usual sides of the coin. The positive aspect is the opportunities for collaborative text production offered by Web 2.0 and the scope it provides for amateurs in general, which is supposed to be an empowering and democratising development. The dark side, however, is represented by what is called ‘playbour’ (Scholz, 2012), which combines the concept of work with that of play, or distraction. The crowdsourcing of translation, including the various forms of online fan translation, should not be understood as pure entertainment, but rather as digital work, especially when it increases the market value of products and generates profits for companies. Scholz clearly illustrates how this type of digital work risks becoming exploitative:

Exploitation does not mean that workers don’t take pleasure in the success of a collaborative effort. There are moments of pleasure despite the fact that we are losing control of our productive and creative activities. While this critique of exploitation does not disparage the pleasures of workers, it also does not nullify exploitative social relations (ibid.,13).

Indeed, especially in the case of the crowdsourcing of translation for profit companies, the line between play and work is blurred. At first sight, this model seems to produce mutual benefits for the parties involved, both companies and translators. In fact, however, it is necessary to ask whether it does not conceal a form of labour exploitation. The loss of control over one's own production and creativity, mainly due to the fragmentation of the translation process into separate translation units or strings, combined with the fact that the authors of individual contributions are not recognised in the crowdsourcing processes of translation, makes this model a potential source of alienation.

The line between risks and benefits can be very thin in many cases. Online collaborative projects respond to the need for social relations and the desire to feel useful for a given language community. Moreover, this type of translation also satisfies the need to improve one's skills, as the translators' competence is effectively increased through continuous practice in collaborative online projects. The downside is that this type of translation is mainly practised by non-professional translators who offer their work for free or for a very low price, accepting the fact that their collaborative role in the realisation of the final product is not appreciated. This risks devaluing the profession in the long run, as many critics have already observed (Andrejevic 2013; Flanagan 2016).

**4. Collaboration between humans and machines**

If modern forms of online collaborative translation practices have not created greater visibility for translators, they have certainly produced a heightened visibility of translation in society (O’Hagan 2011).

Mihalache (2021: 32) has provided an overview of the evolution of technology applied to translation. It is a process that has taken place in stages, albeit historically short-lived, starting with the first machine translation experiments at the end of the 1960s, to the technological development of the 2000s and the achievements of the modern Web that has integrated social aspects into the technology, and finally to the increasing focus on user needs in recent years.

Today, translation technologies, in the form of so-called CAT tools, play a key role in supporting human translation. Moreover, neural Machine Translation (NMT), which has developed rapidly over the last 20 years, appears to be a particularly promising technology, as the use of artificial intelligence (AI) distinguishes it from the technical solutions of other translation tools. NMT systems are able to improve continuously, thanks to human input, resulting in collaborative modes that do not merely assist the translation process, as is the case of translation memories, for example. These systems create a complementarity between humans and technology that produces an overall effect that goes beyond the sum of the individual human, on the one hand, and technological contributions, on the other. Scholars such as Desjardins (2017, 2019) and Mihalache (2021) have referred to this synergy between humans and technology as ‘augmented translation’, which is now advertised in various translation agencies. But what exactly do they mean by augmented translation? The well-known market research institute CSA Research offers us a comprehensive definition:

Augmented translation is a new approach to combining the strengths of humans and machines to address growing needs for multilingual content. In contrast to traditional post-editing, which leaves translators at the end of a process and asks them to clean up garbage machine translation (MT) output, augmented translation places linguists at the center of a constellation of technologies that support them and extend their capabilities: enhanced translation memory, adaptive neural machine translation, automated content enrichment, next-generation terminology management, lights-out project management, and microservices-based translation management systems.  The results increase the productivity and value of human linguists by providing relevant information and letting them focus on those aspects of translation that require their attention.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Augmented translation uses AI systems in a similar way to ‘augmented reality’, where AI helps people focus on the most relevant information to be found in the context they want to investigate. Similarly, augmented translation platforms offer translators guidance for their work by providing a wide range of devices through which they can perform real-time terminology searches or in-depth investigations of different domains and their stylistic norms. Routine tasks are processed automatically, allowing translators more time and concentration to tackle complex challenges, such as those requiring a high degree of creativity or expert intercultural skills. In addition, automatic content enrichment systems can assist translators by automatically linking terms to authoritative resources, helping them to disambiguate them and find the target-specific resources that can help to make translations more relevant to the target audience. It is a complex system that aims to optimally combine human and technological tasks, in which the translator is the main protagonist. In practice, the different technological components interact with each other and learn from the translator, as in the following typical example:

an ACE system will query a terminology database to identify terms and suggest them. The MT system will interface with both to disambiguate text and use their suggestions. All of these will feed into the translation memory, which will increasingly merge with MT. The lights-out project management system will learn about different linguists, their schedules, and their strengths and weaknesses and route work to them based on an individually tailored profile. [[3]](#footnote-3)

For translators, this means that they will no longer be at the back of the line, with no influence on the translating process. Instead, they will control the technology and work with it, becoming even more efficient. As stated on the CSA website, in typical advertising fashion, the augmented translation process «does not replace language professionals, but instead gives them the tools and resources to deliver their best value and quality» (ibid.) Thus, not only will humans be assisted by technology, but, as Grusin puts it, they may go further and ‘co-evolve’ (Grusin 2015, ix) with it, exporting parts of human knowledge as in a kind of ‘digital prosthesis’.

This is all very optimistic, but one might wonder if there are not some drawbacks behind this tremendous technological development of translation. The risks that technology may negatively affect the quality of translations, and even eventually make human translators redundant, have only too often been advanced by professionals (Heyn 1998; Cadwell et al. 2018). Furthermore, Mihalache (2021: 30) argues that it is necessary to be aware that some technologies operate without a person's knowledge or consent, and that digital users, especially the younger generation, are at risk of becoming addicted to technologies, and moving away from human interaction.

Ultimately, however, there are aspects that machines are not able to deal with. AI technologies cannot handle the translation of multi-layered texts, and the specificity of the socio-cultural context is still beyond their potential. Consequently, it is very likely that translators will remain firmly at the centre of the translation process, but will have to strengthen their skills especially in the areas of creativity and flexibility.

Mihalache's conviction is that technologies should not only be seen as tools, but rather as «partners in innovation and knowledge exchange» (ibid., 32), paving the way for an innovative form of collaboration between the human and non-human worlds. Technologies do not just provide translators with almost indispensable technical tools and speed up the translation process through NMT models. They also help us work in a critical and self-aware way and can even push us beyond the boundaries of our conventional ways of working and thinking. Augmented translation allows us to manage workflows that go beyond human capabilities and skills and, as a result, forces us to rethink our practices and expectations, providing us with a more efficient operating space for the different situations we have to handle in translation.

However, this is not a cyborg utopia that generates a sense of omnipotence and unlimited freedom. On the contrary, innovative collaboration with technologies should produce new and self-reflexive translation thinking that necessarily brings with it a responsibility recently defined as a ‘political ecology of translation’ by Bassnett and Johnston (2019), who have emphasised the growing need for large-scale collaboration between human communities and their environment. Translation, by its very nature a space of encounter and confrontation with the Other, is now able to expand its collaborative vision into a dimension that embraces the whole world:

a political ecology of translation sees languages in their connectedness, not in isolation (Cronin 2017, 152). Through translation we can become more aware of and take responsibility for our own surroundings, asserting our right to diversity but recognising the fundamental importance of communication within and between communities (Bassnett and Johnston 2019, 183).

Technologies help us to look at reality in a different perspective when we make translation decisions. And this is already happening in the daily work of countless translators who, working in synergy with technology, have already somehow crossed the (blurred?) boundary between human and non-human abilities. But this carries with it ethical responsibilities towards the world around us that we can no longer escape.

**5. Beyond other frontiers: translation and ecology**

The reference to the concept of ecology, which Cronin (2017) was the first spokesman for in Translation Studies[[4]](#footnote-4), takes the discussion of collaboration beyond what he called the ‘anthropocentric’ or, to put it more simply, human sphere. Translation, as an expression of our understanding and representation of the Other, cannot escape a wide-ranging, ecological dimension that embraces all that is human and non-human. However, it is undeniable that until now all the theories that have dealt with the ethical and political dimensions in Translation Studies - in particular the approaches studying power differences from a postcolonial perspective - have focused on human communication and on the unequal distribution of power between cultures belonging to different human communities.

In the field of Cultural Studies, ecocriticism (Zapf 2016; Feder 2014; Greg 2012) has been concerned with the study of the relationship between humans and the physical environment, or the natural world, from an ecological perspective. Yet, most often ecocritical approaches tend to address the ways in which humans experience, or respond to, nature and environmental subjects. As we have seen before, we have a strong tendency to use animal metaphors to describe our relationship with our environment. As a matter of fact, animal metaphors are extremely powerful communication tools because they are processed almost automatically by the human mind. Significantly, animal characteristics have always been exploited to identify inferiority over supposed human superiority, especially in terms of cognitive abilities or moral traits. As a result, animal imagery is still widely used instrumentally to persuade and manipulate, stimulating positive or negative emotions in the listener.

For example, several languages attach the negative connotations associated with bad human behavior to metaphorical references to animals such as pigs, sharks, or snakes. This instrumental use of metaphors can arouse strong emotions that interfere with our rational abilities and can lead, in a kind of boomerang effect, to ascribe such negative connotations to the animals themselves, which are obviously innocent. The word ‘animal’ itself can be considered an effective metaphor. As a noun, it denotes non-human species in a conventional use of the term, while when used as an adjective it refers to behaviours or capacities that are usually considered to be inferior, and which are presumably found in the animal world (cfr. Derrida and Wills 2002).

But here the question arises: what does the animal world have to do with translation? Back in 2004, Carbone argued that: «speaking for animals means interpreting them, translating their animal mind into human language» (Carbone 2004, 4), but the scientific world is debating how this should be done. In the social sciences, more and more attention is being paid both to the structural imbalances between humans and other animals and to the variety of communicative systems in the natural and physical environment that cannot be codified in the forms adopted by human languages. Central to this discussion is a question that is at the heart of Translation Studies: whether to work by assimilation between the perspective of humans and ‘the Other’ (the non-human world in this case) in a naturalising approach, or to recognise and respect differences in a foreignizing perspective (Venuti 1995), the latter being very much in tune with a collaborative agenda. To date, research tends towards an anthropocentric-naturalising approach, in the sense that it adheres to the ‘human yardstick’ against which the capabilities and experiences of all other species are compared (Sealey 2019: 308). On closer inspection, however, human communication does not only take place through language structured by vocabulary and grammar or body language. In fact, our communication also includes involuntary signals produced by bio-regulated systems such as hormones or smells. Today, this area of research is rapidly emerging and has been defined as 'Biosemiotics'. Sealey (2019: 310) quotes Favareau (2010, v), who describes Biosemiotics as «the study of the myriad forms of communication and signification observable both within and between living systems».

In Biosemiotics, the term ‘translation’ is used generically to refer to the meaning-making processes of living organisms. Current research in biology shows that even primitive organisms are in communicative, or more precisely semiotic, interaction with their environment, as they identify and then choose or avoid components of the surrounding world that are respectively useful or harmful to their survival, and these findings have been discussed by translation scholars (Marais and Kull 2016). Marais and Kull emphasise a relevant form of translation that Jakobson (1959)[[5]](#footnote-5) did not mention in his well-known tripartite distinction of translation forms, namely, intersemiotic translation between non-verbal semiotic systems, which is precisely the field of interest of biosemiotics (ibid., 177). Translation Studies are called upon to overcome the linguocentric bias that negatively affects representations of non-human communication when human language acquires normative value for any other form of communication.

Sealy (2019: 314-15) provides a very interesting example about the signification of sounds. Humans are only able to hear a limited range of sounds compared to the variety that can be perceived by other living organisms, which includes wide variations in frequency, volume, pitch and timbre. Many animals are able to process sounds in a very different and more varied way than humans. Thus, although animals such as crickets, cicadas and grasshoppers, for example, do not generate sounds by expelling air through a vocal tract, as humans do, their messages are still called ‘chirps’, ‘calls’ and ‘singing patterns’, borrowing expressions that characterise human communication.

The language we speak influences our experience of the world and our ability to communicate it, and, as a human construct, it functions in specifically human terms. But this process is fraught with risks. Not only can it limit our ability and strategies to translate the different sensory experiences of other species, but it can also reduce our potential for understanding, empathy and collaboration with other living organisms and the environment. We are back to the central dilemma of Translation Studies: the polar opposition between, on the one hand, making the experience of the Other accessible by naturalising it through what is most familiar and, on the other hand, respecting its foreignness and attempting to represent it through a conscious mediation effort- a process that is extremely complex to realise. Going back to the central theme of this collection, it is necessary to keep in mind that every act of mediation involves a constructive dialogue with the Other, which is ultimately the best form of collaboration.

**Conclusion**

The concept of collaboration in translation can be interpreted in various ways, from a simply quantitative point of view (one or more translators at work) to a quasi-ethical dimension that examines the communicative relationship between human beings and the world around them. This contribution did not so much focus on translation in the past, but sought to see how new perspectives can be offered in the present to make collaboration in translation processes increasingly visible.

The reference to technological advances in this field and the possibilities of action they offer translators is quite obvious, but I tried not to stop there, avoiding either a dystopian narrative of the domination of machines over human beings or a utopian vision of a rosy future in which technology relieves translators of the drudgery of the profession. Instead, the emphasis has been on what has been called a political ecology of translation, which takes a broad view of communication that goes beyond the anthropocentric dimension. The notion of collaboration is no longer seen only in human terms, but also embraces the non-human world.

The point I have tried to make in this chapter has not only focused on the concrete aspects of respect and understanding for the creatures around us and for the environment, but also on an open attitude on the part of Translation Studies towards disciplines that are already moving in that direction, such as Biosemiotics. The collaborative dimension of translation here acquires an almost osmotic and ultimately transformative quality: as in many other cases in which Translation Studies has absorbed methodologies and practices from disciplines such as linguistics, cultural studies or computer science, to name but a few, Translation Studies is now being asked not only to collaborate with Biosemiotics, but to absorb its principles and experience, reworking them to produce new creative thinking. Thanks to this approach, the discipline has always proved to be a whole greater than the sum of its theoretical branches and will be ready to face the challenges of the future. In a broad, comprehensive and collaborative vision.

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1. The Statute of Anne remained in force until it was replaced by the 1842 Copyright Act, and was greatly influential in the formation of other copyright laws across the world. Cfr. Atkinson 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. CSA website, <https://csa-research.com/Blogs-Events/Webinars/EventID/80>, last accessed 30/5/2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. CSA website, <https://csa-research.com/Blogs-Events/Blog/Augmented-Translation-Powers-up-Language-Services>, last accessed 30/5/2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cronin can be considered the first spokesman of so-called ecotranslation as far as Western Translation Studies are concerned. Outside the Euro-American scientific community, the Chinese scholar Hu Gengshen had begun developing his model of Eco-translatology based on an “ecology” of translation well before Cronin (although in very different terms), at the turn of the 2000s. Another Chinese scholar, Xu Jianzhong, also developed the concept of “translation ecology” in the mid-2000s (also in very different terms from Cronin). I am indebted for this information to my colleague Paolo Magagnin. For further reference see Gengshen 2003; Jianzhong 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. According to Jakobson (1959), the interpretation of a word (verbal sign) can take place in three ways: intralinguistic, interlinguistic and intersemiotic. In intralinguistic translation, interpretation takes place through other words that belong to the same language. In interlinguistic translation, on the other hand, interpretation makes use of words that belong to a different language. In intersemiotic translation, signs belonging to different semiotic systems are used to interpret a word. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)