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On Institutional Translation in a Fictional Context: Interdisciplinary Remarks on the Structure and Hierarchy of the Royal Institute of Translation in R. F. Kuang's *Babel*

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Abstract: Employing an interdisciplinary approach from linguistics, literary studies, and translation studies, this article examines the structures and

hierarchies present in the fictional Royal Institute of Translation, the emblematic institution of British imperial power which is the lynchpin of R. F. Kuang's 2022 speculative novel *Babel*. With the work primarily set in a fictional 1830s Oxford where magical translation-based silver bars are the key to colonial dominance, the institutional management of languages and translation unsurprisingly assumes a key role. After contextualising Kuang's towering creation in historical, linguistic, and literary terms, the hierarchy and structure of the Institute is presented and discussed via close reading of a selected excerpt from the novel. This analysis is complemented by relevant observations on the institutional and professional context of translation and interpreting both in historical and in contemporary times.

Keywords: 21st century literature, Babel, British Empire, colonialism, institutional translation in fiction

Introduction

Acknowledging the complex interplay of sociopolitical, ethnocultural, and linguistic factors in determining the status and diffusion of a given language or dialect, the imposition of certain linguistic standards and the denigration of others has characterised imperial projects across the centuries (Migge & Léglise, 2007). With language—and by extension, translation and interpreting—representing not just an instrument of communication but also a statement of power, formal and informal policies have been fundamental in ensuring the promotion of selected languages as well as the prohibition or minoritisation of others (Baker & Pérez-González, 2011, p. 45). In the European context, this institutionalisation of selected languages—typically the official or dominant languages of major nation-states—and their spread via colonisation has had profound consequences on the global dissemination of languages such as French, Russian, Spanish, and particularly English. Indeed, in the postcolonial context, the presence of English as a first or additional language remains key in contemporary language policy discourses around the world, leading to an array

of implications for education, society, and even national identity (Bhatt, 2010; Hoyte-West, 2024a).

In settings such as education, administration, and the military, as well as in large companies and enterprises, the institutional use of languages can be said to acquire particular magnitude when operating in bilingual or multilingual environments (e.g., see de Fourestier, 2010; Turner & Wildsmith-Cromarty, 2014; Wakkumbura, 2016). Indeed, a study on the global Finnish corporation KONE determined that multinationals "cannot allow language to become a peripheral, or forgotten, issue, given that it permeates virtually every aspect of their operations" (Marschan et al., 1997, p. 597).

At the national, international, or supranational levels, such entities may therefore have additional linguistic requirements to ensure successful communication across language barriers, often relying on translation and interpreting services which may be performed by a wide variety of personnel, ranging from trained in--house or freelance translators and interpreters to *ad hoc* practitioners. As will be discussed subsequently, the creation and institutionalisation of such services is something which has occurred for centuries, with particular relevance in colonial and imperialist contexts (Caminade & Pym, 1998).

At this point, it must be underscored that, for millennia, translation and interpreting between languages were strictly human endeavours—i.e., an activity and professional domain restricted to those with competencies in another spoken or signed language beyond the mother tongue. Yet, it is important to mention that over the past half-century, increasing advancements in technology have overturned this notion, revolutionising the sector not only for its practitioners, but also for society at large, thereby affecting all of us who require or consume multilingual services irrespective of format. Even in the hallowed chambers of the European Union (EU), an international organisation known for its longstanding maximalist multilingualism policy which encompasses the two dozen official languages of its 28 member states, change is afoot (Modiano, 2022). Despite its unique commitment to equality between all of its official languages, the practical role of English is becoming ever more important across the EU despite its status as the co-official language of just two of the bloc's smaller states and the mother tongue of less than one percent of EU citizens (Modiano, 2024,

p. 204). And a recent statement by the current German chancellor, Friedrich Merz, opined that interpreters will doubtlessly be replaced by machines in the coming years (Txabarriaga, 2025). As such, technology has ensured that what was formerly considered something of an attribute—i.e., the skill of translating or interpreting from one language into another—is becoming commonplace, even in high-level contexts such as international fora and symposia.

Though movements such as "slow translation" emphasise the continuing importance of the human touch (Hurot, 2022; 2023), open questions naturally remain about the future contours of language management in institutions and organisations, particularly in terms of market forces and evolving official policies. Yet, for the time being, the relevant organs, structures, and hierarchies relating to languages and language policy remain, as exemplified by the continuing need for directorates of translation and interpreting at the various EU institutions and elsewhere.

By placing an interdisciplinary spotlight on this wide-ranging and relevant topic from linguistics, literary studies, and translation studies, this article explores aspects of institutional translation via close reading of *Babel*[1], a bestselling historical novel by the American author R. F. Kuang first published in 2022. Though perhaps unusual in terms of a case study, the selection of this fictional example—set in a speculative early 19th century Oxford—builds on prior work which acknowledges the interplay between literary studies and management studies (e.g., see de Monthoux, 1979; Michaelson, 2017; Lehman & Morgan, 2021, etc.), as studies on works by authors as different as Tove Jansson (Tienari & Savage, 2024) and J. K. Rowling (Yu et al., 2021) to Upton Sinclair (Man, 2024) and Franz Kafka (Dziedzic, 2025) have elaborated. However, though of course recognising the value of organisational analyses of fiction, the present article has opted to place a literary lens on the topic. In analysing *Babel*'s Royal Institute of Translation, the fictional institution which forms the novel's

[1] The book's full title is *Babel, or The Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution*. The paperback edition (Kuang, 2023) will be used in this study.

centrepiece,[2] this study therefore aims to outline the structures and hierarchies presented through analysis of a selected excerpt, interlinking these with salient observations on the real-life institutionalisation and professionalisation of translation and interpreting in the historical and modern-day contexts.

Languages in institutional contexts: some brief comments

Within the discipline of linguistics, theoretical perspectives on language management emerged in the late 1980s (Jernudd & Neustupný, 1987). Since then, scholars have examined and situated it within various facets of language policy and planning (e.g., see Spolsky, 2009; Nekvapil, 2016, etc.) and case studies of language management in specific organisations and settings have also been conducted (e.g., Nekvapil & Nekula, 2006; Wilmot, 2022). The present analysis rather focuses more, however, on institutional approaches to applied languages—particularly translation and interpreting—from an interdisciplinary perspective involving linguistics, literary studies, and translation studies.

However, it is necessary to state that much work on various sociological aspects of the major international employers of translators and interpreters has been conducted (e.g., Koskinen, 2008; Duflou, 2016). The creation of cadres of professional translators, interpreters, and other specialised linguists is often found within various international and institutional contexts in the present day—for example, the existence of departments and directorates dedicated to translation, interpreting, and multilingualism in the institutions of the EU, United Nations (UN), and other supranational and national organisations (Apostolou, 2011; Sheng, 2024, pp. 134–143, etc.).

Noting the early 19th-century temporal setting of *Babel*, the historical context for the training and institutionalisation of translators and interpreters within the European imperial context is also worthy of brief mention. As has been additionally presented

[2] As the Institute and the tower are also nicknamed 'Babel', they will be referred to by their official moniker in this article to avoid possible confusion with the novel's title.

elsewhere (Hoyte-West, 2024b, pp. 106-107), the administration of the multiple languages and ethnicities of the late Ottoman Empire also required the services of dragomans, who were fluent in various languages and also had diplomatic capabilities (Rothman, 2021). The officialised multilingualism of late-19th century Austria-Hungary naturally required the services of teams of skilled linguists, and with the Austrian portion of the empire recognising 11 official languages, translation thus represented a key component of the empire's day-to-day administrative and operational capabilities (Wolf, 2015). For those European nations with expansionist aims on other continents, institutionalised language and translator training was therefore a key component in their colonising missions, as the 19th-century creation of establishments as varied as the Lazarev Institute of Oriental Languages in Moscow (Şahin, 2010, p. 600), the College of Interpreters in French Indo-China (Vo, 2024), and the Seminar for Oriental Languages in Berlin (Spidle, 1973, pp. 235–237) attest. As such, by embedding language training at the heart of the apparatus of the modern colonising state, it has been illustrated that translators and interpreters therefore performed key roles in both contiguous and overseas empires.

The complex relationship between language and power is well-known (e.g., see Fairclough, 1989), and Edwin Gentzler and Maria Tymoczko observe in the introductory chapter of their seminal edited collection *Translation and Power* that translation can be related to all of the definitions of 'power' in the Oxford English Dictionary "in part, because translation is a metonymic process as well as a metaphoric one" (Gentzler & Tymoczko, 2002, p. xvii).

For translators, too, this is a dynamic that has often proven to be influential, particularly in the imperial early 19th-century context which is the temporal setting of R. F. Kuang's *Babel*. Indeed, Susan Bassnett and Harish Trividi highlight the ideological role practitioners played at that time through presenting the cases of highly-acclaimed mid-century literary translations from Persian (Edward FitzGerald's *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*)[3] and from Arabic (Edward Lane's (1859) version of *The Thousand and One Nights*). Despite the storied nature of

[3] Scarcely noticed on its initial small-scale publication in 1859, FitzGerald's version of *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* became extremely popular during the 19th century and was revised several times during the author's lifetime (see Morris, 2023).

the texts and the richly abiding literary and cultural heritage of both languages, Bassnett and Trividi underline that the translators "clearly saw themselves as belonging to a superior cultural system" and thereby represented "a means both of containing the artistic achievements of writers in other languages and of asserting the supremacy of the dominant, European culture" (Bassnett & Trividi, 1999, p. 6). This is echoed by Sherry Simon, who underscores that the notion of "'Translation' refers not only to the transfer of specific texts into European languages, but to all the practices whose aim was to compact and reduce an alien reality into the terms imposed by a triumphant Western culture" (Simon, 2000, p. 11).

To this can be added the particularities of the British colonial milieu, where the role of English in translation processes also assumed key importance via policies of linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992), a topic which *Babel* explores in depth. As applied by cultural theorist Tejaswini Niranjana to the situation of British-ruled India, by "forming a certain kind of subject, in presenting particular versions of the colonised, translation brings into being overarching concepts of reality, knowledge, and representation" (Niranjani, 1990, p. 774). She adds that this trifecta and its underlying suppositions also "completely occlude the violence which accompanies the construction of the colonial subject" (Niranjani, 1990, p. 774). As will be presented in subsequent sections of this article, this is a state of affairs which the happenings in the fictional *Babel*—and the Royal Institute of Translation—not only depict but eventually aim to avenge.

R. F. Kuang and *Babel*

A graduate of both Oxford and Cambridge, the prize-winning Chinese-American author Rebecca F. Kuang is the author of several acclaimed and bestselling historically-informed novels, often dealing with themes relating to East Asia, colonialism, and empire, topics which also feature prominently in *Babel* (Hsu, 2025). Featuring on the *New York Times* bestseller list, the novel has received numerous international awards and prizes, with its position "at the crossing-place between popular genre fiction and literary fiction" (Fletcher & Leane, 2024, p. 9) ensuring a wide appeal.

As the titular allusion to the Old Testament suggests, Kuang's *Babel* also refers to a tower; however, in this instance, it reflects the nickname given to by the students to the eight-storey edifice which houses the Royal Institute of Translation. Offering a fictional portrait of an imperialist language training institution, the book is primarily set in a speculative Oxford during the mid-1830s (see Fusco, 2025). With the 19th century characterised by expanding European colonisation and the consequent annexation and subjugation of vast swathes of the globe, this decade was a crucial time for Britain and its empire as it stood on the cusp of modernity and had also abolished slavery (for more, see Manning, 1965). As will be presented later, In Kuang's ersatz world, Britain's imperial dominance is formalised by the presence and fashioning of magical silver bars where translation between English and another language pair[4] plays a special role.

In terms of *Babel*'s location, Kuang's notional pre-Victorian Oxford shares many similarities with the real one. With its first college founded almost eight centuries ago, Oxford is the oldest university in the British Isles and one of the world's most highly-ranked tertiary institutions. As well as its enduring status as an elite powerhouse and as a crucible of literary and cultural production (Dougill, 2010), the university also retains the footprints of Britain's lengthy imperial past (University of Oxford, 2025), factors which are explored in the novel in an original manner.

Babel's principal narrative is essentially the story of young Robin Swift, a multilingual orphan of mixed European and Chinese origin who is taken from his native Canton and brought to Britain by the mysterious Professor Lovell. Taking particular care of the boy (it later transpires that Robin is his illegitimate son), Lovell ensures his charge enters Oxford University's most prestigious and elite institute. alongside a small group of new entrants from various other linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Although they are expected to utilise their polyglot abilities to be loyal servants of the British empire, Robin and his colleagues become aware of the darker side of the role of the Royal Institute of Translation in the wider colonial

4 As defined by a leading international language services company, the term 'language pair' represents "two languages that can be translated from one to another" (RWS, 2025).

project, which leads to a dramatic outcome. With its focus on language and its role in colonisation processes, it is therefore unsurprising that institutional translation and the management of languages feature heavily in the novel. Though ostensibly set in a notional version of the early 19th century, it draws attention to many issues (such as power, race, colonialism, and identity) that are equally applicable to our current reality. Perhaps unsurprisingly given its popularity, there has been an impressive amount of research conducted on *Babel* since its publication, which have analysed numerous facets of this original and impacting work (for example, see Kohlke, 2022; Bădulescu, 2024; Abrigó Ciarrocca, 2025; Liu, 2025; Prafitri et al., 2025; Teliban, 2025; etc.). Yet, as far as can be determined, previous research has not focused on the aspect explored in this study—i.e., on the institutional structure and hierarchy of the Royal Institute of Translation as depicted in the novel.

In providing some interdisciplinary remarks on this phenomenon through analysis of a specific episode from the novel (the students' initial encounter with the Institute via a guided tour of the building), this study aims to add to the literature on depictions of institutional translation in fiction and culture. Though organisational entities (such as various international institutions) do feature as part of the setting of a given literary narrative, such as the International Criminal Court in Katie Kitamura's (2021) novel *Intimacies* (Wu, 2024) and the UN headquarters in the Hollywood film *The Interpreter* (Pollack, 2005), it is commonly a focus on individual practitioners and their personal plurilingual and professional attributes that is often used to drive the plot of a creative work: "the inclusion of translators and interpreters as main or significant characters can be used to highlight aspects of the profession" (Miletich, 2024, p. xvii). As will be presented in the case of R. F. Kuang's *Babel*, however, analysis of the institutional setting can also yield valuable reflections on the role of language and its management therein.

Findings and discussion: The Royal Institute of Translation in *Babel*

After the long sea voyage from Asia, young Robin's first encounter with the imperial powerhouse of 1830s Britain is a sojourn involving intensive training

in London, which "had accumulated the lion's share of both the world's silver ore and the world's languages" (Kuang, 2023, p. 21)—the mythical "silver hummed through the city" (Kuang, 2023, p. 21). His enigmatic guardian, Professor Lovell, outlines Robin's destiny as a student and future graduate of the Royal Institute of Translation, assuring him that he will "'be one of the few scholars in the world that knows the secrets of silver-working'" (Kuang, 2023, p. 23). After the necessary cultural and linguistic preparations, including a personalised crash course in Latin and Greek, Robin arrives in Oxford, a city which "in 1836 was in an era of becoming, an insatiable creature feeding on the wealth which it bred" (Kuang, 2023, p. 61), thereby hinting at the quasi-cannibalistic nature not only of silver--working but also of the language-based colonialisation processes which it symbolises.

Accommodated at University College ('Univ'), Oxford's oldest college,[5] Robin and another member of the student cohort, Ramy, are taken to the university's ancient library, the Bodleian. As putative members of the Institute, their burnished status as translators quickly becomes apparent—the director of the Bodleian, the Reverend Dr Bandinel, himself guides them to the Translators' Reading Room: "'Couldn't let a clerk do it', he sighed. 'Normally we let the fools wander about on their own and ask for directions if lost. But you translators—you truly appreciate what's going on here'" (Kuang, 2023, p. 62). This is reiterated by the fact that, in searching for books on their reading lists, their association with the Institute literally opens doors which are about to close: "mention of the Translation Institute seemed to hold immense power [...] the clerks told them they could stay as late as they liked" (Kuang, 2023, pp. 63–64).

The small cohort consists of two male (Robin and Ramy) and two female students (Victoire and Letty) yet is quite diverse, both in terms of personal ethnocultural origins as well as linguistic capabilities. Alongside the classical languages of Latin and Greek, an "entry requirement" (Kuang, 2023, p. 73) which demonstrates the two tongues' foundational status as the bedrock of western

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5 Kuang is herself an alumna of the same college, where she completed an MSc in Contemporary Chinese Studies as a Marshall Scholar (University College Oxford, 2022).

civilisation, the students are fluent in a range of modern languages alongside English: Arabic, Persian, and Urdu (Ramy); French and Haitian Creole (Victoire); French and German (Letty); and Mandarin Chinese (Robin) (Kuang, 2023, p. 73). In Robin's case, the hierarchy of languages is notable; despite being from Canton and speaking the local language fluently: "'His Cantonese, Professor Lovell [had] informed him, could now be forgotten'", adding that "Mandarin was the language of the Qing imperial court in Peking, the language of officials and scholars, and therefore the only dialect that mattered" (Kuang, 2023, p. 28).

The group are taken to the tower housing the Royal Institute of Translation, located in Kuang's speculative world near Oxford's iconic Radcliffe Camera. The students "gazed up at the tower. It was a magnificent building" (Kuang, 2023, p. 72), and are met and guided around it by Anthony Ribben, a Black postgraduate student with French, German, and Spanish, who later becomes instrumental in the subversive and breakaway counterweight to the Institute, the Hermes Society.

With eight floors, the physical structure of 'Babel' (the epithet given to it by its students) is of immense importance in the novel. In guiding them through their new surroundings, Anthony introduces the Institute by offering a brief general summary of its historical background, noting that "Translation agencies have always been indispensable tools of—nay, the centres of—great civilisations" (Kuang, 2023, p. 75), thus emphasising the centrality of language and translation to the cultural and ideological hegemony it aims to disseminate. The institution's prominence in Britain's colonial ascendancy is also reiterated: "The Royal Institute of Translation was founded in London in the early seventeenth century, though it didn't move to its current home in Oxford until 1715 and the end of the War of the Spanish Succession, after which the British decided it might be prudent to train young lads to speak the languages of the colonies the Spanish has just lost" (Kuang, 2023, p. 75).

The group enter the building on the first level, a large lobby where, they are informed, "all business gets conducted here. Local tradesmen ordering bars for their equipment, city officials requesting public works maintenance" (Kuang, 2023, p. 75)—it is, Anthony notes, "the only area of the tower accessible to civilians" (Kuang, 2023, p. 75). In short, this serves to emphasise the Institute's

exclusiveness by underlining its restricted access—i.e., that its public-facing business is limited to solely one floor at the tower's ground level.

The second floor is devoted to the legal department which, as Anthony outlines, consists of "International treaties, overseas trade" (Kuang, 2023, p. 76)—in sum, "the gears of empire, the stuff that makes the world go round" (Kuang, 2023, p. 76), An explanatory footnote about the department adds that "one could argue that the business of translators in Legal was manipulating language to create favourable terms for European parties" (Kuang, 2023, p. 76). It is also mentioned that this floor employs the largest quantity of Royal Institute of Translation graduates, Thus, although not explicitly mentioned, it can be advanced that these in-house legal posts are relatively commonplace, despite widespread perceptions of law-related careers as being of high status. However, it has been found that, when compared to careers at the Bar, employment as an in-house lawyer for companies can be viewed by fellow legal professionals as being of lesser status (Mackie, 1989, p. 213).

The tower's third floor is, according to Anthony, the "landing base for the live interpreters" (Kuang, 2023, p. 76) who are seldom in residence: "They're almost never here" (Kuang, 2023, p. 76). Interestingly, given their global peregrinations, Anthony explains to the students that the Institute's spoken-language interpreters are not "career interpreters but usually natural polyglots who picked up their languages elsewhere—they had missionary parents, or they spent summers with foreign relatives" (Kuang, 2023, p. 77), which itself harks back to how recruitment practices occurred in the days before real-life interpreter training institutions were established in the 20th century (e.g., see Rothman, 2015). Interestingly, given the professional prestige often accorded to conference and diplomatic interpreters by virtue of their honed skillset and the settings they operate in (Thiéry, 2015, p. 107), Anthony adds that in the Institute "live interpretation isn't considered all that glamorous, because all that really matters is that you get your basic points across without offending anyone. You don't get to play with the real intricacies of language, which is of course where the *real* fun is" (Kuang, 2023, p. 77).

Status—or lack of it—also informs Anthony's view of the Institute's fourth floor, which is devoted to literature: "A bit low on the prestige run, to be honest,

but it's a more coveted placement than interpretation" (Kuang, 2023, p. 77). However, he adds that literary translation is considered "the natural first step towards becoming a Babel professor" (Kuang, 2023, p. 77), and thus entry to the organisation's teaching staff. Anthony's relatively lowly view of the literature scholar is hotly contested by another scholar the students meet during the tour of the floor, Vimal Srinivasan, who welcomes them "to the best floor in the tower" (Kuang, 2023, p. 78). This interesting observation on the status of the Institute's literature department can be counterpointed by real-life observations on literary translators who, despite not always enjoying strong economic benefits, nonetheless possess considerable intellectual and cultural capital through their work (Hoyte-West, 2022; 2023). This is also highlighted by the fact that, at the time of writing, the complexities of literary translation have arguably proven the most resistant to machine translation and AI technologies, though of course these aspects are evolving (Hoyte-West, 2026). An illustration of the power of literary translation can be seen in the following excerpts, which observes that the Institute's literature specialists "could be the most dangerous scholars of them all, because they're the ones who really understand languages—know how they live and breathe and how they can make our blood pump, or our skin prickle, with just a turn of phrase" (Kuang, 2023, p. 78). However, according to Anthony, it transpires that they are "too obsessed fiddling with their lovely images to bother with how all that living energy might be channels into something far more powerful. I mean, of course, silver" (Kuang, 2023, p. 78)—in short, that he believes that the literary translator's talents would be better-used if they engaged their brainpower and expertise into something much more lucrative.

With the epigraph of the novel's opening chapter featuring a quotation from Antonio de Nebrija's landmark 1492 grammar of the Spanish (Castilian) language (Kuang, 2023, p. 5—see also Cassen & Kirk, 2024, p. 429), the intersection between linguistic standardisation and empire is embodied by the fifth and sixth floors of the tower. As their guide explains to the students, these teaching and reference rooms contain "the primers, grammars, readers, thesauruses" (Kuang, 2023, p. 79) of every single language spoken in the world. The most important of these reference materials are the 'Grammaticas' on the Institute's sixth floor, consisting of red leather-bound volumes kept in display cases, representing

"the only comprehensive, authoritative collections of knowledge of every language that exist" (Kuang, 2023, p. 80). Indeed, their invaluable importance is highlighted by the fact that the volumes are "impervious to fire, flood, and attempted removal by anyone who isn't in the Institute register" (Kuang, 2023, p. 80)—i.e., that access to these linguistic treasure troves is strictly controlled, thereby highlighting their fundamental role in the Babel project.

Though not mentioned on the students' tour of the tower, the map at the beginning of the book notes that this is dedicated to offices. Anthony takes the young newbies to the eighth and highest floor, which represents the apex of the Institute's power. Unlike the other floors, which are open plan, the floorplan here is "hidden behind doors and walls" (Kuang, 2023, p. 81). Thus, the secretive nature of the activities which go on there are also highlighted in spatial terms, demonstrating a marked difference with other floors which have preceded it. In visual terms, the eighth floor is also strikingly different, being "more like a workshop than a research library. Scholars stood bent around worktables like mechanics, holding assortments of engraving tools to silver bars of all shapes and sizes" (Kuang, 2023, p. 81). It is here that the students are introduced to the organisation's director, Professor Jerome Playfair, who discourses at length about the Institute's civilising mission: "Translation, from time immemorial, has been the facilitator of peace. Translation makes possible communication, which in turn makes possible the kind of diplomacy, trade, and cooperation between foreign peoples that brings wealth and prosperity to all" (Kuang, 2023, p. 83). Adding that "There is indeed something special about silver" (Kuang, 2023, p. 83), Playfair expounds on its links to hermeneutics, emphasising that "the power of the bar lies in words. More specifically, the stuff of language that words are incapable of expressing—the stuff that gets lost when we move between one language and another. The silver catches what's lost and manifests it into being" (Kuang, 2023, p. 84). To this end, he performs a brief experiment involving an English and a German word pair which causes a silver bar to vibrate violently. For the incoming students, it is noted that though: "they were no strangers to this magic [...] it was another thing to witness with their own eyes the warping of reality, the way words seized what no words could describe and invoked a physical effect that should not be" (Kuang, 2023, p. 85)—i.e., it

was a clear demonstration of the power that silver-working—and by extension, the Royal Institute of Translation, as its principal vessel—could wield.

Zoning in on the eight-storey structure of the Royal Institute of Translation itself, it is clear that the imposing edifice holds both physical and metaphorical weight in the novel and its events. Indeed, the tower's key importance is denoted not only by a map of the building and its floorplan at the opening of the novel, but also—in paratextual terms—by the unique tower-shaped bookmark which accompanies the paperback edition of the volume. Combined with the events of the novel, these aspects serve to reiterate the Institute's tower as a phallic symbol of colonial dominance, similarly to research on late 20th-century office towers which described them as the "popular architecture of a patriarchal corporate culture" (Dovey, 1992, p. 173). In addition, the physical structure of the Royal Institute and its elite intellectual scholarship also highlights the institution's separateness from everything else, with scholar Sarah R. Davies stating that "intentionally or not, Kuang's *Babel* echoes images of academia as an ivory tower, a metaphor used to present universities as cloistered environments that are segregated from the societies in which they sit" (Davies, 2024, p. 11). As the most elite department of an already elite university, the Institute is thus doubly isolated from the colonial society that it aims to foster.

Thus, in practical terms, it is seemingly that the Royal Institute of Translation's hierarchy emphasises a traditional pyramid-like management structure (Saiti & Stefou, 2020; Mercadal, 2021), its various floors occupied by bureaucrats holding different statuses and representing different facets of the translational and linguistic professions with clearly demarcated functions. As such, at first glance it resembles many of the directorates of language services present in many contemporary multilingual international organisations, with a range of highly-trained personnel performing specific job profiles as lawyer-linguists, spoken-language interpreters, or translators (Prieto Ramos & Guzmán, 2022). Yet, in the context of the Institute, the whole construct is pervaded by the interlinkage between colonial power and language: the dominance of English, as the language of the British Empire, is omnipresent. Indeed, insurrectionist attempts to destroy the dominance of the Institute and the colonial hierarchy occur later in the novel, leading to the eventual annihilation of the tower, like its Biblical namesake. These

revolutionary grumblings are initially exemplified by the breakaway Hermes Society, a covert underground organisation formed by disaffected former Institute students. There, its projects include dictionaries of regional and minority languages (Kuang, 2023, p. 384), and silver bars with language pairs excluding English are being created. Yet, despite efforts to create greater diversity, the dominance of the colonial language continues, with Cathy, one of the other rebel Hermes members, musing that: "'I think it's not conceivable that one day, most of the world will speak only English'" (Kuang, 2023, p. 386). To Robin's comment that this "would destroy silver-working" (Kuang, 2023, p. 386), Cathy, answers that this represents "'the great contradiction of colonialism [...] It's built to destroy that which it prizes most'" (Kuang, 2023, p. 386).

In accordance with its traditional tower-like managerial structure, it is unsurprising that the Institute's power is located in the building's highest echelon, being both metaphorically and literally the organisation's zenith. This is demonstrated not only by the presence of Professor Playfair, who as the Institute's chair represents a CEO-like personage, but also by the presence on the eighth floor of silver-working, the main driver of British imperial supremacy as portrayed in the novel. Though several aspects of the novel relating to resource-related extractivism and social theory have already been discussed (Benia & Amrane, 2025), it is interesting to note how, in the Institute's hierarchy, intellectual labour (i.e., translation and interpreting) is superseded by something more resembling a trade or craft (i.e., silver--working), thereby inverting the blue-collar/white-collar dichotomy. This is highlighted by the students' observations that the prestigious eighth-floor of the tower resembles a factory rather than a library, as might have been expected. In short, as Anthony's comments regarding the literary translators on the fourth floor illustrate, the physical activity of silver-working is demonstrated as being of significantly greater value to the Institute (and beyond) than the brainwork diligently performed by the translators and other associated personnel. Thus, in attaching this worth to the magical silver goods, it can be argued that this focus is redolent of the industrial might that would propel Britain and its empire—and by extension, its colonial systems and institutions—across the world.

Conclusion

In an interdisciplinary manner employing insights from linguistics, literature, and translation studies, the present article has delineated the structure and hierarchical nature of the Royal Institute of Translation in *Babel*, tying these—where relevant—to real-life aspects relating to the status and institutionalisation of translation and interpretation in multilingual organisations. Via the close reading of a selected portion of text (where Robin and the other entering students first become acquainted with the tower that will forever be linked with their destinies), the presence of a strict hierarchy—with silver-workers representing the highest echelon—is also ingrained in the Institute's architecture, with each floor dedicated to a particular translation-related task of varying prestige. Noting the symbolic and literal importance of the building as the crucible of British colonialism, the Institute's structure and hierarchy unsurprisingly emphasise its actions and role in promoting a specific vision of imperial power, a perspective which ultimately, by the end of the novel, is destroyed. By providing a short overview of the structure and management of translation-related activities in a fictional organisation in a speculative world, the excerpt analysed in this article has also highlighted the different attributes and statuses accorded to different translational practitioners, which do not necessarily correspond with real-life situations.

In reorienting the scope of the present interdisciplinary approach away from linguistics, literature, and translation studies, further research could examine Kuang's novel from the perspective of management studies. In addition to deepening the discussion on how the novel's depiction of silver-working views translation purely as a resource to be exploited, a different disciplinary approach could utilise relevant theories to demonstrate how the Institute's restrictive policies systematise and perpetuate inequality in organisational contexts, as well as how the Institute's leadership imposes discursive dominance through its restrictive linguistic oversight.

Nonetheless, in opening up a discussion on the inextricably intertwined legacies of language, colonialism, and imperialism, the structure and hierarchy outlined in R. F. Kuang's *Babel* has served to underline just how translators and

interpreters in institutional settings, as instruments of language policy, can exercise an influential role with potentially far-reaching consequences.

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