

***translation* speaks to Robert J.C. Young**

translation editor Siri Nergaard met with Robert J. C. Young in New York City on September 14th 2012 at the Nida Research Symposium. During the conversation Young expresses how, as a scholar of postcolonial studies, he became interested in translation and how he discovered that “translation in some sense is what postcolonial studies is all about.” After a discussion on the centrality of power in translation, the conversation shifts to empowerment and how, in the colonial context and elsewhere, this involves a three-stage process that includes the experience of being translated, then of de-translation, and finally of retranslation of the self. Young explains how he intends “cultural translation,” a process in which he is particularly interested, especially in the sense of a specific practice. With examples from both Freud and Fanon, he explains how we can reconstruct such a practice—a practice that encloses a theory—through a kind of archaeology of how it has been performed in earlier idioms.

(Issue 1 of **translation** contains Young’s article “Frantz Fanon and the enigma of cultural translation”); (Robert Young’s lecture at the 2013 Nida Research Symposium was devoted to how Freud can be considered a theoretician of translation and how his psychoanalysis can be seen as a form of translation. The lecture can be accessed at the NSTS website:

<http://nsts.fusp.it/events/conferences-and-symposia>).

The discussion then deals with the question of whether it is necessary to limit the definition and use of the concept of translation, the authors who have meant the most to Young, and the theme of national languages and multilingualism.

The interview with Young was recorded and can be viewed at the journal’s website:

<http://translation.fusp.it/interviews>

NERGAARD: Since we are interviewing you for our journal called *translation*, the first question I would like to ask—and we are very pleased to learn that you have been for a quite long while now working and focusing more and more on translation—is why? How did you get into the question of translation?

YOUNG: Well, that’s an interesting question. I suppose in practical terms the first time I tried to think about translation in a postcolonial frame was when I was invited to give a talk at Mona Baker’s MA in Translation Studies at Manchester. There was a developing interest in translation in my own field, postcolonial studies, with respect to translation studies, so I started getting people in translation studies contacting me to ask about it. That led me to focus on an area of post-colonial studies that actually had already been developed quite considerably. Translation, after all, in some sense is what postcolonial studies is all about because it is about the degree to which historically colonialism performed acts of translation, if we can speak metaphorically.



What it added to that idea of cultural contact and transformation was of course the relation of power, which maybe had not been so prominent in translation studies itself, although people like Lawrence Venuti, from a slightly different angle, but in some sense already not entirely foreign to the postcolonial, had been developing ideas about the question of power in translation. So along with that was the role that translation actually performed historically as part of the colonial project or whatever you might like to call it. And that again brings up the question of power, because the people who performed the acts of translation were generally the ones who were empowered, and the translations that they produced usually reflected their own concerns and needs, though of course that's not unique to them, that happens today. Every translation in a way is like that, but in the postcolonial context it means that it's possible to chart the transformations that translations produce in terms of translating one culture to another.

An obvious example would be the translation of law in India, which began in the eighteenth century: the need of the British to establish information about how law operated in India in English rather than in either Persian or Sanskrit, because the resources, particularly the Sanskrit, were inaccessible to them. And yet when they translated, they did not just translate faithfully, they actually transformed the law in the act of translation. That transformation is particularly what I am interested in. The process which follows from that becomes the colonial question: how do I, as a colonized person, or as a person who is in a situation being dominated by another power more generally—how do I *retranslate* myself?—if my culture has been translated by a dominant foreign culture and I have been transformed into a different kind of being. The anticolonial question, we could say, was precisely “How do I retranslate myself?” Both Gandhi and Fanon argue, in different ways, that before liberation could be successful, the people, the colonized people, needed to perform acts of translation personally in order to achieve independence. So there has been a long history of interaction of translation within the procedures of colonial and decolonizing acts.

NERGAARD: It is interesting that you insist on the aspect of power, and I think the power question is an example of how much translation studies had learned from postcolonial studies so much that Edwin Gentzler and Maria Tymoczko published a book called *Translation and Power*. They proposed that there is, or should be, or is on the way, a “turn” in translation studies and that is the turn of power. That is interesting and I think that is a good example of that dialogue. Another thing I would just ask you a little more about is how do colonized peoples retranslate themselves? There are

also examples of the subaltern who finds another way to translate him or herself, that is not as a dominated—but turning the terms around so the question of power becomes more complex because it is not “I am dominated and you are the dominator” but I turn the terms around and maybe empower myself in retranslating myself.

YOUNG: And that idea of empowering through translation is a very interesting one. Of course the very word “empower” is a relatively new word in many languages. We can link it dramatically to the term “translate” in this context. Probably in that process there is going to be something of a procedure of *de-translation* in order to effect retranslation. You have got probably a three-way / three-part scheme there, in terms of being translated, then de-translating yourself in order to retranslate yourself and that is, I would say, the procedure that needs to be followed in the colonial context. It is a procedure that we can think of operating or using in all sorts of other contexts too—intellectually for example, as well as politically. How do we de-translate ourselves out of certain ideological assumptions that we’ve been brought up with in order to perform new acts of translation?

NERGAARD: To describe this process, is that when you can use the term “cultural translation”?

YOUNG: Well, that could be a way of describing what cultural translation performs and that is something I have been particularly interested in. It is a difficult phrase, because translation is a hugely complex issue and culture is equally problematic, perhaps more problematic than translation. So, for example, the idea of cultural translation came from anthropology; anthropologists invented that term, but actually they do not use it any more—it has been appropriated into cultural studies. And it tends to be used in a relatively loose way compared to the way people use the term translation in translation studies. One of my interests is to think more about that concept of cultural translation and to develop ideas of how we can think about it as a more specific practice. It is not going to be obviously just a single practice, but what does it really mean and what use is the word, either cultural or particularly translation, what is it doing there? Do people mean just change, or is there something more significant going on? That is something I have been interested in recently.

NERGAARD: And do you have some hypothesis—some clearer idea of where a deeper understanding of the concept of cultural translation might lead us?

YOUNG: What I have been trying to do recently is to look for examples of where people have in some sense written or theorized about

cultural translation, probably not even using the term because it is a relatively new term. Increasingly it seems to me that it is something that there has been written about quite extensively in the twentieth century without actually been given that label. To take one example from Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*: of course he did not use the word "civilization," he used the word *Kultur*, a term that was not used in English translation because in the 1920s the word "culture" in English already had a specific meaning relating to English–German rivalries, so it was not a neutral term. But if we think about that book as *Culture and Its Discontents*, you can see that Freud was actually talking about the effect of culture on individuals, in a way he was talking about the process of cultural translation that we all undergo, and making a rather bleak argument about it, but producing, it seems to me, a theory of it. So there are ways like that that we can usefully think about cultural translation as it has been performed in earlier idioms.

NERGAARD: Very interesting. Are there other authors who develop a theory of cultural translation, in your opinion? You have written on Fanon for the journal, and in his work, you see the concept of cultural translation, too.

YOUNG: Yes, Fanon is very interesting. I have kept my eye open, but I have not actually found him using the word translation, and in fact it is an interesting gap in his work. But he does use the word "mutation" quite a lot, and when he uses the word mutation, he is talking about that process of transformation that I was describing earlier. Obviously, in some sense it is Fanon I was thinking about when I was talking about that three-stage process of transformation. In his famous essay "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation," Jakobson also uses that term as a synonym for translation, although he calls it "transmutation," in his third category. I think it is not unrealistic, it is not stretching a point too far, to carry that transmutation as a concept into Fanon and see that as a form of translation, in some sense; not in a literal translation, "translation proper," but in a wider sense. I think Fanon really makes translation central to his whole argument. Throughout his life, it's a guiding thread.

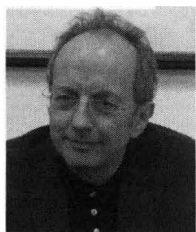
NERGAARD: As you said, it is not translation in the literal sense. As you know, there is a debate regarding these different uses and definitions of translation and Harish Trivedi, for instance, argues that we should not speak about cultural translation because then everything is translation. It seems that you are a bit on both sides.

YOUNG: In-between.

NERGAARD: In one sense you say—Yes, that's a problem, if we use it in this loose way it loses significance, but on the other hand you reformulate it or you redefine it through your reading of authors who invoke a form of cultural translation, maybe even without calling it translation. Maybe that is the kind of solution you find, or do you feel you are in-between these two?

YOUNG: Well, yes, I sympathize with the arguments that Trivedi makes and many other people who are working within the practice of translation in terms of linguistic translation. I mean I can certainly see their point and it is a reasonable one. On the other hand, they do not have a kind of legal copyright over translation. In fact, if you look at the history of the word, the practice of linguistic translation is not the earliest way in which the term translation itself was used. In different languages, translation as a concept also involves different words that have different histories so that is very varied as well. What you might call the metaphorical use of the word translation, or what seems to us now to be the non-literal use of the word translation, is as old as translation itself. So it is a lost cause in the first place to try and limit it to language only; and secondly, since it has never been limited to language only, it seems to have survived perfectly well. At the end of the day it still works for what people want it to mean in a precise way. As the word translation itself suggests, all meaning is metaphorical. Therefore when thinking about translation, which has the advantage of being a specific practice, if you feel you have lost your bearings, you can always go back to that. But it can be used as a way of thinking about other kinds of translation. Equally, doing that works back into translation itself, because when you start thinking about cultures, for example, which of course in any modern contemporary description are heterogeneous and not bounded, you start wondering about translation and the degree to which it assumes separate languages that are bounded, where you need some act of moving one to the other. That may be the case now because it has been constructed in that way, say in Europe, though even in Europe actually it is not entirely the case. For example, French and Italian are not totally separate languages in practice, as you know, particularly if you go to the borders of France or Italy or Switzerland. Similarly in India, for example, where languages have a different kind of relation, or Arabic would be a good example—Arabic is officially one language, but actually in a way it is many languages. So should we assume that translation is about the transformation of these entirely separate languages, or should we start to rethink that and think about the differences between interlingual and intralingual in Jakobson's terms? Of course it is useful to separate languages, but maybe they are not so strictly demarcated as we tend to assume.





NERGAARD: Yes, maybe because we are very conditioned by national languages, languages as national languages.

YOUNG: Yes, exactly. When you think about any national language it is already languages. Take Italian—of course in a written form it is usually one language, but spoken Italian is actually many languages, and that is true for most languages in fact.



NERGAARD: I personally agree completely and we need to delve much more deeply into culture to learn more about how it works and then come back to practice and translating in order to understand what it is. We have to go not directly from one language to the other or only focusing on the practice.

YOUNG: Right.



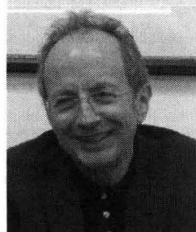
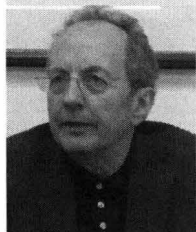
NERGAARD: When we understand what is happening in culture, then we understand what is happening directly in the practice.

YOUNG: Yes, because it is culture that has produced our concept of what a language is, so we cannot just operate with those terms without thinking about them—they are not just given things.



NERGAARD: We have been speaking about authors who do not speak explicitly about translation, except for Jakobson. But among authors who do discuss translation, who has been important for you?

YOUNG: For me I suppose most of the classic texts on translation I find very interesting—Benjamin, obviously, just as for everybody in the world it seems sometimes, is totally fascinating because he is so enigmatic—his “The Task of the Translator” is such an odd essay. In particular the metaphors he uses are so tantalizing because in certain respects they do not seem to be the correct metaphors for translation at all, so that is very engaging. The degree to which Heidegger turns into issues of translation in philosophy, issues about etymology that have been so differently, but in a very related way, developed by Derrida, are particularly interesting to me. But of course, as soon as philosophers start to talk about translation, they immediately move into the register of language, because (aside from Derrida) they want to find a language which can in some sense speak “truth” of some kind and that is always a problem for philosophers—they keep going into that but translation makes it problematic. At the same time they also want to extend the idea of translation, so they want to also say translation happens not just between languages, but it actually happens *within* languages—it happens actually with every kind of conceptualization. So they too are always extending



the concept of translation into, not cultural translation, but you might say conceptual translation, or conceptualization as a form of translation, so that I find fascinating too.

And then I am also particularly interested in ideas of polylingualism, linguistic multiplicity, and the theorists who have approached that issue, because I think again few of us actually think or operate—and certainly few societies—in one language. And again there is an assumption that societies are monolingual and that translation is about translating into the language of another society in some sense. But one of the things you see very quickly if you work in the field of the postcolonial is that certainly every postcolonial society that I can think of, as well as the metropolitan societies that embody that postcoloniality—they are all multilingual. We do not really recognize the degree to which in fact we live in a very multilingual environment all the time. We do not just hear one language; any day of the week we hear many languages and different people have different relations to those. So that again complicates this relation of fixed single languages.

NERGAARD: Thank you very much.

YOUNG: Pleasure.

Robert J.C. Young, FBA, is Julius Silver Professor of English and Comparative Literature at New York University. He has published *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (1990); *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Culture, Theory and Race* (1995); *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (2001); *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (2003); and *The Idea of English Ethnicity* (2008). He is Editor of the bimonthly *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, and was also a founding editor of the *Oxford Literary Review*. His work has been translated into over twenty languages. Young is a member of *translation*'s advisory board. E-mail: rjy2@nyu.edu

