

ROBERT J. C. YOUNG

“Some Questions about Translation and the Production of Knowledge”

“**T**he practice of translation has always been described in metaphorical terms, as ‘fidelity’ or ‘license’, notably, and this tendency to describe it solely in terms of what it is not (to borrow Aristotle’s description of metaphor) means that as a result it is therefore always running away from itself, while its content remains unspecified. Perhaps this is why one of the fates of translation as a word is also to find itself incessantly being translated in turn by being used as a metaphor for something else—and never more so than now—perhaps because as a metaphor it remains in some sense an empty signifier. A whole range of changing human, institutional and cultural experiences are deemed to fall under the rubric of the translational. Translation, the activity of the transposition of one language into another, has itself been translated by cultural commentators into a modus operandi of our times, reflecting on the one hand the preference for dynamic rather than static concepts or metaphors, and on the other, though not entirely disassociated from the first, the increasing cultural, economic, electronic, institutional and material interaction of different sections within society and between different societies. In a globalizing world, translation seems to offer the most apt metaphor for the ways in which practices are being daily transformed in almost every area of society, from academia to zoology. What, however, is exactly being performed in such processes of translation?”

The ‘translational turn’, if we may call it that, is occurring at the very moment when current work in translation studies has been

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focussing on the ways in which translation is not a neutral activity that transforms one text into another language in a transparent way, but always involves a form of power relations that directs the terms of the translation, which in turn affects its result, massages the message. Translation, it may be said, always takes place on someone's terms, and the results are those which best conform to the terms that have been preset. Translation never involves a transparent or neutral act of substitution or negotiation; rather it produces a transformation that may embody a whole range of philosophical, political and cultural agendas (whether conscious or unconscious) that translation helps to put into practice—and never more so than when translation is negotiating between significantly different cultures (whether between different times, between different strata within a particular society, or between different societies). Here translation begins to participate within the hidden, determining processes of a particular ideology. A good example is provided by Cliff Siskin and Bill Warner: at the beginning of Kant's "An Answer to the Question, What Is Enlightenment?" (1784), Kant translates Horace's two-word admonition, 'sapere aude!' ('dare to understand!' or 'dare to gain wisdom!') as 'Habe Muth dich deines eigenen Verstandes zu bedienen!'--'Have the courage to use your own understanding!' With this single free or, strictly, mistranslation, Kant turns the pursuit of knowledge inside out, from gaining understanding of the world, to daring to use your own inner principles of understanding, pointing knowledge henceforth in a thoroughly Kantian direction. Kant revolutionizes the modern subject by turning him or her inwards upon the self so that understanding henceforth becomes its own object of knowledge. Does translation produce new knowledge or does it sometimes end up providing forms of false or bogus knowledge, travesties that, paradoxically, seem to work better? Kant's creative (mis)translation effectively refracted the trajectory of the Enlightenment that he is discussing.

The structure of translation, however, is not always simply a binary one, between two texts. In fact it always involves at least four dimensions—the translator, the source and target texts, and the eventual reader. Translation is equally often inserted in a power field operating according to a range of simultaneously incompatible demands and needs, between different authorities, multiple languages, requiring production of a certain kind of knowledge that may be very different from that or those in the texts in other languages—or domain—that are being translated. In general terms, Enlightenment ideals of comprehensive or universal forms of knowledge required them to be deployed on a level playing field in which they could make up part of a compatible system, and transparent translation was one means through which that universal economic system of knowledge exchange was supposed to be effected and produced. We could say that this was an early version of Jakobson's radical equivalence in difference. Today we would add that the epistemological and cultural differences embedded in the forms of different languages means that translation always involves transformation, it is not a transparent and exact process. It offers a process of equivalence, but the equivalent is never fully equivalent. Translation theory focuses on this paradoxical moment when translation makes the different into the same, but a same which is at the same time different. Philosophically, this perception has produced a movement the other way, towards an emphasis on untranslatability. What does it mean that today we have

moved the stress to the untranslatable? Knowledges, we now wish to say in a counter-Enlightenment move, are not necessarily constructed in a translatable way; so Jacques Derrida argued that philosophical ‘concepts [cannot] transcend idiomatic differences’, and this has produced continuing reverberating effects in the history of philosophy which until recently has been presented as a multilingual discipline unaffected by the linguistic difference that forms its own medium. Exactly the same point can be made about Translation Studies itself. Following Derrida, recent commentators have stressed how such knowledge contains forms of resistance that emerge in moments of ‘untranslatability’.

What, then, in a world of translation are the effects of this particular twist of the current translational turn? What are the conditions of the contemporary performance of translation? What forms of transformation or mistranslation are being produced under the rubric of ‘translation’, and which if any of them are providing significant examples of transformation, re-alignment, or resistance? Which forms of translation in our current translational world have proved enabling, which disempowering? Does translation produce new knowledge or does it rather end up providing forms of distorted knowledge through ‘fuzzy translation’ that nevertheless manages to work as knowledge but which are as much determined by linguistic difference as by any mediator? What is the difference between translation and ‘mediation’? At what point does mediation encounter irremediable untranslatability, how does it deal with it when it does and what effects are produced?

