

"Et tu, ©ompute?" Or, Is Text Translation by Machines an Act of Breach or Revolution? Abe Hsuan - Irwin & Hsuan LLP – USA

Walter Benjamin, one of the first thinkers to articulate a clear need to think about the new regimes created by the powers of mechanical reproduction, wrote in his essay "The Translator's Task" ("Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers") that translation is not about achieving a stylistic or expressive fidelity to the original text. Rather, "[a] real translation is transparent." It renders the original in a "pure language," by which I read my copy of Benjamin's essay (in English translation) to mean, 'rendering the original in the form of its essential ideas.' (See Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator" (introduction to a Baudelaire translation, 1923; this text translated by Harry Zohn, 1968), taken from the anthology, *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti (London: Routledge, 2000)). As the awkwardness of this duty-based citation illustrates in part, the effort and industry of translation strikes at the heart of the idea/expression dichotomy which has long helped to keep the potential tyranny by Copyright Laws in check and balance. With machines becoming capable of translating copyrighted (and copyright-free) materials, often without human agency or mediation wherever and whenever needed, we are forced to rethink some long-standing views about what constitutes knowledge, what is creative or unique (or human) about expression, who should benefit from concepts of "fair use" and "free speech," etc. etc. In short, whether the act of text translation by machines converts textual materials into knowledge (which is a human right) or a capital asset (which is a property right) or a hybrid or something else entirely, and who (or what) must answer for the powerful machines that can commit such acts.