

Merkel responds to Reem: What we should be training mediators for

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Abstract: In the age of social media, dissent or protest rarely elicits response from official power, which instead seeks to occupy alternative media spaces with its own messages. In one-on-one face-to-face communication, however, some response can still be provoked, and political change may yet ensue. One such encounter, between German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the fourteen-year-old asylum-seeker Reem Sahwil, illustrates some of the communication frames and modes of engagement that can inform such non-mediated communication. The question is then whether all those features are necessarily lost in mediated communication, through an interpreter or translator, or can those features perhaps be enhanced by training our interpreters and translators to use their skills as spokespersons?

On July 15, 2015, German Chancellor Angela Merkel participated in a televised question-and-answer session with schoolchildren in Rostock. Reported on Spanish television, fourteen-year-old Palestinian Reem Sahwil asked the Chancellor why she, Reem, could not stay in Germany; Merkel answered that Germany could simply not accept everyone from the Middle East and Africa, adding that “politics is hard”; Reem began to cry; Merkel went to comfort her – politics is hard, but the Chancellor, affectionately known as “Mutti” (Mum) can be soft. She responded.

That response is what first interests me here. According to a certain theory of “communicative capitalism” (Dean 2005), our media circulate messages of resistance and dissent – social media, but mainstream as well – in such a way that those in power are curiously not required to respond:

Rather than responding to messages sent by activists and critics, they counter with their own contributions to the circulating flow of communications, hoping that sufficient volume (whether in terms of number of contributions or the spectacular nature of a contribution) will give their contributions dominance or stickiness. (Dean 2005: 53)

The occupation of media space by dissenters is thus countered by an opposed occupation, without engagement or debate. Dean finds her prime example in the public resistance to George W. Bush’s invasion of Iraq, when there was widespread coverage of arguments for and against the existence of weapons of mass destruction and the like. When the

numbers of people in the street and messages on social media seem overwhelming, when you are sure that everyone you know is in complete agreement with you, when it seems, further, that the world's most powerful technologies are also on your side and, yes, there are even signs of your views in the mainstream media, still those in power are strangely exempted from action: they need offer no response.

Something similar happens where I live. Catalonia has now spent several years pushing for independence from Spain, with truly massive public demonstrations, election of a regional government committed to independence, and sustained representation in all media. Yet the official response from the Spanish government has not varied: "Do not ask for what we cannot give." That is, no response.

All of us can find further examples around us, wherever people speak to power and power only responds by filling up its own communication space.

So is it really impossible to get a response? Can we find examples of that? If we knew how to elicit sincere response, we might know how to promote dialogue in our democracies. The question is of some importance.

A few other responses spring to mind. The Irish singer Bono met with French President Nicholas Sarkozy on January 8, 2008, leaving with a promise that France would restore a \$29-million contribution to the Global Fund to fight Aids, tuberculosis and malaria. A short meeting with the President could produce more funds than a rock concert for charity.

Or closer to home, the translation scholar José Lambert taught me a valuable lesson when we arrived at a hotel, perhaps in Prague, too late to get anything to eat or drink. So José goes and soon returns with food and a beer, against all the house rules.

- How did you do that, José? Everything is closed!
- I just asked, "And if it were for me..."

If it were for me... Me here, you there, and we are in face-to-face direct communication. Virtually the same phrase appears in the Merkel's exchange with the Palestinian girl Reem:

Merkel: So wenn du jetzt vor mir stehst bist du ja ein unheimlich sympathischer Mensch. Aber du weißt auch, in den palästinensischen Flüchtlingslagern in Libanon gibt es noch Tausende und Tausende....

[Now that you are here in front of me, you are an exceptionally nice person. But you also know that in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon there are thousands and thousands...]

I and you, Ich und Du: I recall that *Ich-Du* is one of Martin Buber's "primary words" (1923/2000), the other one being *Ich-Es*, the relation between the self and the world of objectified things. Ethical dialogue, for Buber, is framed by the *Ich-Du*, the space of direct, unmediated communication (which for him was prayer, but we might try to extend the idea to the realm of social dialogue).

What happens then? As the Chancellor leaves the *Ich-Du* space, she recognizes that "politics is hard", then she starts to talk about third-person things: the thousands in

the refugee camps in Lebanon, and then the whole of Africa – we really can't accept them all (and, in an earlier part of the exchange, she thoughtfully adds that asylum-seekers from Syria are in even greater need of help). Further, in the logic of Merkel's world, the solution is to speed up the decisions on who can stay and who has to be sent back, so that situations like Reem's no longer occur. And as the Chancellor discusses the third-person numbers, the world of *Ich-Du* erupts into visibility: Reem starts to cry, Merkel is emotionally moved, then she physically moves across the studio to comfort the young girl.

This change of frames is quite complex. As Merkel moves, she speaks to Reem but the moderator interjects:

Merkel: Du hast das doch prima gemacht.

Moderator: Ich glaube nicht, Frau Bundeskanzlerin, dass es da ums Primamachen geht, sondern dass es natürlich eine sehr belastende Situation ist ...

Merkel: Das weiß ich, dass es eine belastende Situation ist. Und deshalb möchte ich sie trotzdem einmal streicheln, weil ich, weil wir ja euch nicht in solche Situationen bringen wollen und weil du es ja auch schwer hast und weil du ganz toll aber dargestellt hast für viele, viele andere, in welche Situation man kommen kann.

Merkel: There there, You did that really well.

Moderator: I don't think, Madam Chancellor, that it is about doing things well. It is a very difficult situation...

Merkel: I know it is a difficult situation. That is why I want to comfort her [third person], because I [singular], because we [plural] do not want to put you [*euch*, second person plural] in such situations and because it is very difficult for you [*du*, singular] and because you have presented really well for many, many others the kind of situation that one can find oneself in.

The moderator resists: No, we are showing reality. The politician insists: We are enacting our own reality.

There are at least three communicative frames here: Merkel and the moderator refer to Reem in the third person (*sie*), objectifying the situation of the asylum seekers; then Merkel momentarily addresses an imaginary collectivity of asylum seekers (*euch*), as if they were there and as if she really could speak to them all; she starts that address in the first person singular (*ich*) but shifts immediately to the plural "we" (*wir*), since she is supposed to be representing the situation of her government and possibly her society; and quickly that we-you plural illusion collapses as she addresses Reem in the second-person singular (*du*), about how well she, Reem, has *represented* the first frame and has spoken on behalf of the people in the imaginary second frame, and has actually addressed and moved the plural "we" of the television audience. In effect, Merkel shifts Reem's position from the world of things to part of a second-person collectivity, and then to a new role as spokesperson for that collectivity. She implicitly sees in Reem someone who is involved in the same performance that she, Merkel, is producing: both Reem and Merkel are representing human situations, although one is doing so in more human terms

than the other, and is certainly winning more sympathy. *Du hast das doch prima gemacht*: you did it really well – as one artist to another, I appreciate your art.

Reem has indeed since been elevated to the level of media spokesperson, becoming something of a cult figure (known in the German press as the Palestinian *Flüchtlingsmädchen*, the “refugee girl”). Her opinions are sought, reproduced, and commented upon, including her opinion of Chancellor Merkel, whom she describes affirmatively as an understanding person who has her own opinions. Just as Merkel judged her, so she judges Merkel. As for the Chancellor, her decision to “comfort” Reem went viral as a video fragment (losing much of the previous discussion), and #merkelstreichelt became a Trending Topic in 2015, producing much mockery of the Chancellor’s attempt at conciliation. Perhaps because of the extensive media space occupied by that mockery, but perhaps also because of the encounter with Reem itself, Merkel has led Germany to adopt a much more open stance with respect to Syrian refugees, despite much resistance from elsewhere in Europe. She has responded.

One further aspect of the encounter interests me. The language used by both Merkel and Reem is colloquial, culturally embedded, and quite hard to translate. When Merkel sees Reem as an “unheimlich sympathischer Mensch”, each of those three words allows for several possible renditions in English. And when Merkel describes her comforting act as “streicheln”, there is no English word that is entirely happy in that function: “stroke her” (for cats?), “pat her” (for dogs?), indeed “comfort her” (shades of “comfort women”?) – perhaps we would do better with something like “I want to be with her a while”? (Spanish, as it happens, has the entirely acceptable verb “acariciar” to describe the Chancellor’s action.)

The same embeddedness characterizes Reem’s language. Much as the initial reports in Spain had her simply asking why she could not stay in Germany, she actually states a clear goal, a positive aspiration, with repeated markers as such:

Ich habe ja auch Ziele, so wie jeder andere. Ich möchte studieren. Es ist wirklich ein Wunsch und ein Ziel, das ich gerne schaffen möchte.

[I also have goals, like anyone else. I would like to study [at the university]. It’s really my aspiration and something that I would really like to do.]

This is not a discourse of complaint or vindication; there is no asking for human justice or special favors. Reem is presenting her situation in positive and future-oriented terms. And then she gives a linguistically sophisticated account of her current situation:

Und es ist wirklich sehr unangenehm zuzusehen, wie andere wirklich das Leben genießen können und man es selber halt nicht mitgenießen kann.

[And it is really unpleasant to see how others can really enjoy life and one cannot enjoy life along with them.]

This “mitgenießen” structure (literally “to enjoy with”) sits poorly in English: as a concept, it envisages a benefit that is shared, gained without taking anything from

anyone. And the one thing separating the present from that future goal is the uncertainty of a girl who has had a temporary status for four years.

All the newspaper accounts of the exchange insist on how well Reem speaks German, after just four years of school in Germany. She got the top grade in her German class; she likes languages (English, Swedish, French, as well as German and Arabic); she hopes to become an interpreter or a teacher. In short, she wants to become one of us. But surely she would do better as a chancellor?

What does this have to do with translation?

The exchange between Merkel and Reem is not translational. It is formally unmediated (once Merkel removes the moderator from the discussion), and translation involved mediated communication. So what would happen if the exchange *were* mediated, for example by an interpreter working between German and Arabic?

Our knowledge of translation tendencies (from Levý 1963/2011) suggests that the language would not have been so colloquially embedded or discontinuous: the hesitations and false starts would have disappeared; the words most specific to spoken German (especially the modal particles) would have disappeared or have become more generic; there would be less lexical variation; a few explications might have made things accessible to the wider audience but less engaging for the two people involved. In sum, the translated encounter would not have spoken so directly to intimate experience. Would Reem have cried? Possibly so, since it is during the technical third-person world of numbers that she breaks down. But would Merkel have responded? Possibly not, or at least not in the same way: there would always be the possible excuse that “this is just the way they speak in their language”.

For the past few years my Translation Practicum class in Monterey has included an activity where each student has to write 250 or so words, in their L1, on a personal experience (usually called “The Most Wonderful Moment in my Life”) (I stole the idea from Andrew Chesterman). Then those paragraphs are translated into L2 by both the author and another student, who then revise each other’s translations. The aim of the exercise is to give students the experience of being translated. But we invariably discover other things as well: even when revised by the author, the translation never has the evocative power of the non-translation, basically because the L1 forms part of the experience itself, or more exactly of the way it is recalled. The authors often remark that the translation is correct, but it’s not moving, not engaging, not authentic. The information can be there, the details, the technical understanding, all present and correct, but not the kind of discursive engagement that the sociolinguists Gumperz and Tannen, in their studies of conversations, call “involvement”. That is, the translations are not associated with some of the features we have located in a one-on-one encounter in spoken colloquial language, the kind that can elicit response.

The reception of translations

For some time my research group has been looking at the way translations are received. The little research that has been done on reception is rather disheartening: there seem to

be very few significant differences between the way different translations are received, or rather, there are greater differences between the receivers themselves: the nature of mediated communication could depend as much on *who* is involved as on *what* the translation is like. This seems to be a case in which empirical comparison is not going to take us a long way, as indeed is the situation in many areas of contemporary Translation Studies.

An alternative approach to reception is nevertheless possible: instead of asking what happens when translations are received, we can speculate on what we would *like* to see happening. After all, if we can't envisage a positive effect of some kind (even if it involves no more than avoiding a negative effect), why study this kind of communication at all? Hence my interest in Merkel's response.

As part of this inquiry, I have turned to a rather different kind of empiricism. I have been interviewing students and scholars who grew up in ideologically totalitarian regimes and who then started to see the cracks in the ideologies. I have, for example, interviewed three women who grew up in Syria, believing in the Assad regime, and who began to question that ideology in secondary school or the first year of university. And I have interviewed South African scholars who went through a similar process with the ideology of apartheid. I initially hoped that the more polyglot the person, the more cultural spaces would be in play, and the easier it would have been for them to see beyond ideological closure. Thanks to the same modeling, I asked about translations, translators, translated literary works, in the hope that they too might have opened a plural ideological space. In all cases so far, the results have been the same: things translational play only a minimal role in opening the cracks. On the other hand, in all cases, the one common factor is one-to-one exchange with a particular person. It could have been a teacher, an uncle, an older sister, often someone who had travelled but not always. The encounters that these people most remembered as having influenced them were always personal spoken, local, unmediated. They were not, by any stretch of the imagination, translational. And they had nothing to do with the occupation of media space.

So what is wrong with translations?

There is nothing wrong with mediated communication. It has its place, its strong points, its social functions. But it cannot achieve everything, and it cannot, I suspect, guarantee a response.

This becomes an important problem when an entire political system chooses to operate on the basis of translations, or of complementary texts that have been produced translationally. The European Union, on paper, is one such system. If you look at its websites, you will find myriad translations giving all the public information you could ever desire: accessible, linguistically correct, written information. It is also bland, impersonal, devoid of location or personality, and necessarily all in the third person, in the discourse of things. True, we can write and receive signed letters that have been translated, and some can have their spoken language rendered into many other languages, thanks to a technical marvel that gets messages across but necessarily loses in the process most of the prosodics, the subtle shifts of frame, the emotional communication, in short the involvement that we found between the Chancellor and the *Flüchtlingsmädchen*.

True, too, that the anodyne technical prose is well suited to a democracy of anonymous technocrats and leaders whose names nobody cares about. Translation has its place, but that place is not to be confused with moving dialogue or engaging lasting emotive response.

Can translational discourse be improved? Undoubtedly. Much can be done to widen the range of acceptable translation solutions, implementing the full panoply that runs from reproducing the foreign through to complete adaptation (this is what I try to show in Pym 2016) – we need to play the full orchestra, not a flute solo. Like Cicero (46CE/1996), we can train translators to be public speakers (*ut orator*), but unlike Cicero and the long tradition that has followed him, we must recognize that there are far more than just two ways to translate (there is no simple opposition with *ut interpretes*).

More than that, however, I suggest we should be training people who are more than translators and interpreters, as indeed we seem to be doing – in the few surveys that I have seen in Germany and Spain, only about a third of our graduates find stable employment in translation and interpreting; the rest go elsewhere. A person with foreign languages, translation talent and communicative skills can work not just as a mediator, but also as a direct communicator, a spokesperson, a commentator, a presenter or re-presenter, in the widest and most active sense – including use of the first person, addition and deletion. Translation has its role and place, but so does the more active communication of experience, and it is the latter, I suggest, that is most lacking in European social and political discourse.

Do you want to be translated, or do you want your ideas to be communicated so that they receive a response? Or would you prefer to speak directly, and receive a response directly, in an ongoing dialogue?

The social challenge facing European societies is to build a new kind of paradise, a place with different cultural and linguistic groups can form a polity, where dialogue enables all to sense they are co-authors of their laws, as Habermas (1995: 130) puts it. A sociologist like Joachim Renn (2006) can theorize this kind of paradise in terms of translation, imprecisely understood as a mode of communication where understanding is possible but initial cultural differences are not abolished. As an abstract model, that kind of concept is appealing to those who otherwise have to rely on nationalist essentialisms. For those of us who know the issue first-hand, though, a regime of translated information will not be enough. It will not provoke the responses needed for active dialogue; it will never allow everyone to sense they are co-authors of their laws. For that, we need to train more communicators like Reem.

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