

# Words in Motion: Struggles of Translation, Adaption, Transposition, and Ignorance

Sebastian Engelmann

Karsten Kenklies

The increase in international pedagogical discussions in recent years has shown that dialogue is challenging since pedagogical notions often do not easily translate from one language into another. Adopting English as the *lingua franca* of the scientific community has merely covered up such differences, with the incongruences surfacing very quickly when discussions dive more deeply. It has become increasingly obvious that hasty translations of pedagogical terms from or into English (or any other language) increase the bewilderment instead of facilitating smoother communication.

Over the last few years, interest in the numerous challenges involved in translating and rewriting educational theories has visibly increased (Biesta 2012; Friesen 2021). Thus, it has been recognized that, for all those who work and do research in the field of education studies, it is equally desirable and difficult to transcend the boundaries of one's own language – not only to be able to engage in meaningful communication with international colleagues, but also to broaden the conceptual horizons of often quite parochial educational reflections. Furthermore, it is indeed only from the viewpoint of an informed multilinguality that one can become aware of the often complex conceptual shifts that accompany those translations and transpositions.

That there are such differences is as expected as it is surprising: expected, as everyone who speaks more than one language knows that languages do not translate into each other so easily; surprising, as there always have

been exchanges of theories and ideas across national and cultural borders not only within Europe, but also across the whole globe. Sometimes voluntarily – on the backs of reasoning or fashions –, sometimes because of enforced enculturation, discursive seeds were sown and grew. However, something happened in this process, and what grew turned out to be very different breeds of pedagogical musings. Anglophone *Education Studies* represent a very different approach to pedagogical theorizing than, to name but one, the German *Erziehungswissenschaft* despite, for example, the widely available – but differing in quality and scope – translations of Comenius, Herbart, Fröbel, Pestalozzi, Spencer, Dewey, and others. Paths of reception are, of course, eternally muddled, and all sorts of influences weigh heavily on such processes. However, it might not be too bold to claim that the differences are at least partially the result of the ways in which central notions and concepts have been translated, adapted, transposed, or even completely ignored. What on the surface looks like a mere moving of a concept from one language into another one, or from one cultural context into the next, turns out to be a much more fundamental rewriting or reconceptualization. To give just a brief example to illustrate the inherent difficulties that bewitch every attempt to translate: a notion that is often referred to in relation to the questioned translatability of terms in Education Studies – or at least in philosophy, theory and history of education in western-European countries – is the term *Bildung* (Horlacher 2016). *Bildung* serves as a signifier for a variety of things, and

scholars tend to say that it cannot really be translated. However, there certainly are attempts to grasp the meaning of the term *Bildung* – attempts that might, for example, use a notion such as *self-formation*. And the various discussions about subjectivation and subjectivity also connect with this understanding of *Bildung* as self-formation. However, as always, the choice of words depends which theory of *Bildung* one actually has in mind when translating; there is more than just one developed understanding since *Bildung* as a concept has a long and complex history – a history during which it very significantly changed its meaning with regard to important aspects. For example, already a close reading of Wilhelm von Humboldt (Humboldt 2000) – widely considered and cited as one of the central figures in the German history of *Bildung* as a concept – proves that he more or less completely reversed the meaning of the notion in comparison to its original understanding as conceived by Meister Eckhart (Kenkies 2018). Translations usually do not take into account such historical and conceptual varieties; to be possible, they have to petrify the normal fluidity and conceptual development of language and its (theoretical) notions.

Another example of the ensuing difficulties is the translation of Friedrich Fröbel's writings. There do exist translations of presumably key texts by Fröbel. However, as Helge Wasmuth points out (Wasmuth 2018; Wasmuth 2020), these are not equipped to grasp the theoretical undercurrents that set Fröbel's work in motion (see also Engelmann 2023). The same is true in any other direction. For example, the writings of John Dewey, which span several bookshelves, have not even come close to being translated into other languages. Or one could consider how the reception of bell hooks in language territories other than the English-speaking world is only slowly getting started – precisely because translations are few and far between or appear in places that cannot necessarily be understood as the epicenter of scholarly discussion.

The difficulties exposed above cannot entirely be avoided. In fact, maybe for

researchers, it is indeed not a question of avoidance, but a challenge of awareness for the shifts in meaning that occur when notions and concepts move either vertically through times, or horizontally through places – or even simultaneously through both, as in the example of *Bildung* above. In the end, reflections like these merely confirm what should generally be known: conceptual and historical discussions are always intertwined. The history of pedagogy remains blind when not guided by conceptual considerations, and the attempts to conceptualize remain empty if the offered pedagogical notions are not “fleshed out” with meaning by historical analyses.

It is for those reasons that international communication is more than difficult, and it explains (without justifying) that international exchanges about education are often turned into discussions about numbers: discussions around words seem to be so much more difficult. Translation projects show in their practical aspects that communication across different languages is more than complex. Such undertakings – in the broadest sense obviously also including working in multilingual research groups, preparing a talk with a scholar from a different field or going abroad for a research visit – often induce peculiar experiences that take up a lot of resources and force the people involved in it to move outside their comfort zones. However, everyday communication in the field of Education Studies seems to be unproblematic as everyone in this context is presumably talking about the same object: *education*. However, it is all too-often forgotten that this notoriously under-defined term has not only its own theoretical history, but also that it hardly has an equivalent in any other language. This also leads to theoretical discussions diverging without ever noticing each other – and to missed opportunities or simply misunderstandings that result from the complex process of translation whose pitfalls are not normally recognized in such discussions.

Academic discussions like to come along wrapped in a cloak of universality. In doing so, they often conceal or are unaware of their own

point of view. Recent work in Education Studies has focused on what it means to speak from a certain position. In particular, the conditions of speaking are taken into account because it does make a difference from what position one speaks and with what intention. Since scholars, too, are subjects bound to place and time and woven into language – often enough subservient to language – those restrictions in the possibilities of knowledge are only human. But those limitations are not generally made explicit. If, for example, an object like Zen (which, of course, has not only its own history but also its own variations) is contemplated in English (or any other language) in Western Europe, it is necessary to point out that one's own perception of this object contributes quite significantly to its construction (Kenklies 2020; Lewin/Kenklies 2020).

Our assumption is that being confined to a scientific language is not without consequences for the construction of disciplinary objects. Understanding is highly improbable. Especially for communication between different languages of scholarship, a great sensitivity is needed for the translation processes that are carried out at every moment. When one's own system of thought is applied in other contexts, it will almost inevitably generate types of friction between both systems. Appropriation, rewriting, straightening, and integration are phenomena that arise from those frictions, although in many cases the discrepancies are not immediately recognized. The authors in this issue have taken it upon themselves to trace these movements of translations and appropriations, of applications and contextualizations. In doing so, they attempt to locate ideas historically, culturally, and systematically, examining in this way the character and the extent of certain systematic shifts and adjustments. The results of those explorations are now available here. We hope that with this Special Issue we can contribute to putting the topic of the motions of words, the travels of ideas and their appropriation and integration back on the agenda.

The eleven papers that form this Special Issue approach the outlined context from

different directions. They are situated in different ways in the discipline (or field) of Education Studies. However, they share the sensitivity in approach and thus show very clearly how productive an engagement with words is – with their movements, translations, discussions. Following the invitation through an open call and undergoing a double-blind peer-review process, the papers gathered here inevitably only represent a certain spectrum of what would be possible and maybe even necessary to discuss. Unfortunately, the global South is not as represented here as it should be. Likewise, no explicitly postcolonial perspectives were offered in response to the call. It is imperative that further explorations of the topic address those regrettable omissions. For now, we hope the individual chapters, which will be introduced in the next few paragraphs, will serve as an introduction to a very important field of educational research.

The first two papers indicate a more historical interest and present case studies of processes in which concepts are re-writing or inscribed into new contexts. In his paper, Marcel Scholz examines the ways in which the ideas of the German educator Johann Friedrich Herbart became mediated and adopted in the United States of America. As an example, he considers the reception of Johann Friedrich Herbart's formal stage theory by the McMurry brothers. Scholz focuses in particular on the strategies the brothers used to make Herbart's work accessible for the readership in the United States.

The following chapter by Frank Jacob deals with the ideas of Ernst Papanek on pedagogy. In 1940, Papanek had to escape from France, via Spain and Portugal, to the United States of America – trying to rescue children by bringing them across the Atlantic on his flight. However, when he advocated for continuing this care for them as a group in a children's home, he was met with resistance. The paper describes this transatlantic struggle of ideas with regard to the role of group therapy for traumatized children and the assumption that living collectively in homes would make a positive impact on those children.

The third paper changes the approach from a more historical point of view to a systematic perspective that engages with questions around the architecture of theories. Ari Kivelä discusses the various notions of the term *Bildsamkeit* that is not only equally central for more Germanic pedagogical discussions as *Bildung* (mentioned above) but also even more difficult to translate than *Bildung*. In his text, Kivelä discusses the philosophical anthropology behind *Bildsamkeit* and its relation to the concept of subjectivity to provide further insights to the question of how *Bildsamkeit* might be translated and adapted in the future.

The fourth contribution by Seyda Subasi Singh, Barbara Hager and Michelle Proyer offers a case study on how researchers in different languages and different cultural contexts understand and use the term *inclusive education*. The paper presents three case studies that hint at the various notions and understandings of *inclusive education*. The authors show how even in one specific context – Education Studies – the understanding of *inclusive education* varies when it comes to translating the phrase across language borders, creating certain responsibilities of the researchers in multilingual research settings.

The fifth contribution – officially starting the second part of the Special Issue – by Aurora Jacobsen Evenshaug and Elin Rødahl Lie allows readers insights into the current educational discourse and its history in Norway. The authors especially focus on the concept of *danning*, which has been central to Norwegian educational theory and practice for quite some time. While *danning* as a word has its roots in the German word *Bildung*, it is not identical with any of the more popular understandings the notion of *Bildung* invites.

The sixth contribution by Louis Waterman-Evans offers a conceptual analysis of an educational concept in motion. The author finds that *Bildung* and the Danish *dannelse*, while historically connected, can be considered parallel concepts of similarity in their shared emphasis on the mother-tongue as a “living

language” and their focus on social cohesion. As such, the paper contributes to the understanding how concepts in translation do not only move spatially but also semantically while they are being adapted and rewritten to fit a specific context.

The seventh contribution by Susann Hofbauer, Peter Kelly and Anna Beck traces the term *evidence* in various educational contexts. The article shows how evidence entered the language of German educational research after 2000. While it can be assumed that this development has been initiated by European evidence policy & the establishment of empirical educational research, and was expedited by what in German is called the *PISA shock*, i.e. the discovery of a discrepancy between a German self-image and the result of the international student assessment study, the situation is different for England. Here, PISA, the OECD and thus the external perception of their own education system hardly seemed to have played a significant role due to years of awareness of the need for reform.

The eighth paper by Karsten Kenklies deals with the concept of *pedagogical tact* that was first introduced by Johann Friedrich Herbart to solve the problem of how to relate pedagogical theory and practice. Concentrating on Herbart’s *tact*, the paper then explores the way in which this specific concept was at first widely ignored in Anglophone contexts despite a heightened interest in Herbartian pedagogy, only to get adapted in a re-conceptualized form much later that seemingly does not respond at all to the problem Herbart originally attempted to solve by introducing the concept of *pedagogical tact* in the first place.

The ninth paper by Jia Liu and Yueling Chen introduces the readers to the pedagogically relevant concept of *Ming* 命. *Ming*, often translated as “life,” “fate,” or “command,” was initially understood as “orders and arrangements from heaven.” In this paper, four texts throughout Chinese history are selected as examples to indicate how the meaning of this concept – and with it its pedagogical

implications – moves, develops and changes throughout different cultural periods of China.

The tenth paper by Johannes Westberg addresses the question of what English language terminology should be used when denoting “schools,” “teachers” and “pupils” in non-Anglo-Saxon countries. He addresses this question by examining the case of Swedish 19th-century “primary schools.” By relating these “schools” to those in other countries, and the terminology used in the research literature, the article provides suggestions for the English-language terms to be used when referring to these institutions, their different types, and the professionals working in them, and problematises the use of terms such as “compulsory,” “public,” and “national schools” in 19th-century contexts as, e.g., that of Sweden.

In the eleventh paper, Jochen Laub and Thomas Mikhail give the first complete overview of all translations of Kant’s *Vorlesungen über Pädagogik* (“Lectures on Pedagogy”). They show that translations of those lectures have appeared in 18 different languages with 50 first editions. This is astonishing against the background that in the German-speaking world the number of scholars who deal intensively with Kant’s pedagogy is assumed to be far lower. The article shows how far the *Vorlesungen über Pädagogik* have spread worldwide, how editors framed the text differently and how the lectures were evaluated by the editors.

We wish to express our gratitude to all authors for sharing this writing and publication journey with us. We are grateful for their disciplined cooperation and always pleasant communication over a long period of time. In addition, we thank the main editors of the *Global Education Review* for inviting us to conceive of and publish this Special Issue, as well as their great support throughout the process. We are sure that they agree with us on the perception that the individual chapters of the Special Issue have been very successful in raising awareness for the problems around the movements of pedagogical words and notions

through space and time, and for the conceptual fissures that result from those motions.

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