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The Theory, Practice and Politics of Cultural Translation

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The concept of 'cultural translation' has received increasing attention across a wide range of disciplines in the humanities, enabling them to focus on the dynamic processes of interaction between different cultures that characterises our contemporary era. Derived from ideas of linguistic translation, the metaphor of translation (etymologically, translation is already itself a metaphor) is utilised as a means of considering the wider effects of the ways in which cultures are transmitted and developed in different contexts, either historically through the operations of colonial expansion and the consequent global diaspora of millions of people, or more recently through the processes of immigration and the movements of refugees. 'Cultural translation' seems to offer a means for thinking about the ways in which cultures are transported, transmitted, reinterpreted and re-aligned through local languages, and more broadly through other cultures with which they come into contact, and the realities of how individuals on both sides experience and interpret such encounters in the 'contact zones' between different cultures. Yet what does it mean to transfer a word that describes the precise practice of the transformation of one language into another into a more general method for cultural change and interaction? Does the term translation have any precise conceptual or theoretical weight when transferred to the realm of culture? What implicit assumptions and values does it carry with it? Starting with a consideration of the theoretical debates that surround the practice of translation, the seminar will then move its focus to the question of whether it is possible to develop translation as a coherent concept that can also be utilised as a means for understanding how the processes of cultural change and interaction take place.