



# Translation

All texts presented to readers as translations are heavy with their authors' philosophical presuppositions about the nature of language, textuality, and cultural history. These presuppositions too often remain unexamined; a translator should say something about them.

The literature on the theory of translation is very substantial.<sup>1</sup> Yet the field of South Asian translation studies remains insufficiently theorized.<sup>2</sup> Amongst eclectic studies that have most influenced my theory and practice of translation are Zimmermann (1989) and Eco (2004). I have been deeply influenced by the arguments of Venuti (1995), although I disagree with the author's final thesis. However, I fully agree with Venuti's central idea – that different language communities have widely-varying expectations of the translations they receive. As he says,

Fidelity cannot be construed as mere semantic equivalence: on the one hand, the foreign text is susceptible to many different interpretations, even at the level of the individual word; on the other hand, the translator's interpretive choices answer to a domestic cultural situation and so always exceed the foreign text. This does not mean that translation is forever banished to the realm of freedom or error, but that canons of accuracy are culturally specific and historically variable.<sup>3</sup>

This is important and, it seems to me, true. It demolishes the belief that a translation can be correct in any absolute sense, or indeed that one can ever provide translations that satisfy all audiences. The success of a translation is contingent on the reader's culture and mother tongue just as much as on the skills of the translator.

I have described some of my ideas about the theory of translation in the introductions to two of my previous books, *Metarules of Pāṇinian Grammar* and *The Roots of Ayurveda*. With many other translation theorists, I consider the act of translation to be, theoretically speaking, impossible. Languages,

---

<sup>1</sup>Baker and Saldanha (2009), Baker (2010), and Venuti (2012) provide entry points to the general field, while Mohanty (1994), Garzilli (1996), Mohanty (1996), and Susan Bassnett (1998) address issues specific to translation in the South Asian. Further relevant studies include Álvarez and Vidal 1996; Tymoczko and Gentzler 2002; Fischer and Jensen 2012; Rodgers et al. 2013.

<sup>2</sup>As was noted by Krishnamurthy (2009: 458); in spite of the important reflections of Sarukkai (2016), the field needs further studies parallel to the mature reflections of Elshakry (2008) on Arabic scientific translation.

<sup>3</sup>Venuti 1995: 37.

cultures and histories, are incommensurable.<sup>4</sup> In order to have a genuine experience of understanding a Sanskrit text, one must read it *and understand it* in its original language, without performing translation either mentally or in writing. For this, one has to bring a level of preparedness to the task, having acquired the source language as a child or through substantial later study. Only when one can read and understand without translating can one move on to translation. Translation is, in my view, a narrative account authored in the target language, of the mental states – especially sentences – experienced by the translator while reading and understanding in the original source language. These processes were eloquently theorized by George Steiner under the name “hermeneutic motion”.<sup>5</sup> A particularly clear example of notational variation is the use of the table to present originally textual material.<sup>6</sup>

Dominik Wujastyk,  
2020

## References

- Álvarez, R. and Vidal, M. C.-Á. (1996), *Translation, Power, Subversion* (Topics in Translation, 8; Clevedon: Multilingual), ISBN: 9780585149806.
- Baker, M. (2010) (ed.), *Critical Readings in Translation Studies* (London: Routledge), ISBN: 9780415469548.
- Baker, M. and Saldanha, G. (2009) (eds.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* (2nd edn., London: Routledge), XXII, 674, ISBN: 0-203-02911-9.
- Eco, U. (2004), *Mouse or Rat? Translation As Negotiation* (London: Orion), ISBN: 9780297830016.
- Elshakry, M. S. (2008), ‘Knowledge in Motion: The Cultural Politics of Modern Science Translations in Arabic’, *Isis*, 99/4: 701–30. DOI: [10.1086/595767](https://doi.org/10.1086/595767), URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/595767>, accessed 24/02/2019.

---

<sup>4</sup>Olohan (2014) discusses this dilemma in the context of the history of science.

<sup>5</sup>Steiner 1998: 296–303.

<sup>6</sup>This is an example of the process of “concept matching” or “symbolic rewriting” described by Sarukkai (2016: 111 ff.).

- Fischer, B. and Jensen, M. N. (2012) (eds.), *Translation and the Reconfiguration of Power Relations: Revisiting Role and Context of Translation and Interpreting* (Repräsentation - Transformation. Translating Across Cultures and Societies, 7; Zurich: LIT Verlag), ISBN: 9783643902832.
- Garzilli, E. (1996) (ed.), *Translating, Translations, Translators from India to the West* (Harvard Oriental Series; Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ.), XVIII, 190, ISBN: 1888789026.
- Krishnamurthy, R. (2009), 'Indian Tradition', in M. Baker and G. Saldanha (eds.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* (2nd edn., London: Routledge), 449–58, ISBN: 0-203-02911-9.
- Mohanty, N. (1994), 'Translation: An Integration of Cultures', *Perspectives: Studies in Translation Theory and Practice*, 2/2: 187–98. DOI: [10.1080/0907676x.1994.9961235](https://doi.org/10.1080/0907676x.1994.9961235).
- (1996), 'Intranslability and the Translator's Task', *Perspectives: Studies in Translation Theory and Practice*, 4/2: 163–71. DOI: [10.1080/0907676x.1996.9961284](https://doi.org/10.1080/0907676x.1996.9961284).
- Olohan, M. (2014), 'History of Science and History of Translation: Disciplinary Commensurability?', *The Translator*, 20/1: 9–25. DOI: [10.1080/13556509.2014.899091](https://doi.org/10.1080/13556509.2014.899091).
- Rodgers, D. T., Raman, B., and Reimitz, H. (2013) (eds.), *Cultures in Motion (publications in Partnership with the Shelby Cullom Davis Center at Princeton University)* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
- Sarukkai, S. (2016), 'Translation As Method: Implications for History of Science', *Indian Journal of History of Science*, 51/1: 105–17. DOI: [10.1163/9789004251410\\_014](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004251410_014).
- Steiner, G. (1998), *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford paperbacks; 3rd edn., Oxford: Oxford University Press), ISBN: 0192880934; First published in 1975.
- Susan Bassnett, H. T. (1998), *Postcolonial Translation: Theory and Practice* (Routledge), ISBN: 0415147441.
- Tymoczko, M. and Gentzler, E. (2002), *Translation and Power* (Amherst, Boston, etc.: University of Massachusetts Press), ISBN: 1558493581.
- Venuti, L. (1995), *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (London, New York: Routledge).
- (2012) (ed.), *The Translation Studies Reader* (3rd edn., London: Routledge), ISBN: 9780415613484.

- Wujastyk, D. (2003), *The Roots of Ayurveda: Selections from Sanskrit Medical Writings* (Penguin Classics; 3rd edn., London, New York, etc.: Penguin Group), ISBN: 0-140-44824-1.
- Wujastyk, D. (2017), *Metarules of Pāṇinian Grammar: The Vyāḍīyaparibhāṣā-ṽṛtti* (Critical Studies on Pāṇinian System, 1; 2nd edn., Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass), ISBN: 9788120839823.
- Zimmermann, F. (1989), 'Terminological Problems in the Process of Editing and Translating Sanskrit Medical Texts', in *Approaches to Traditional Chinese Medical Literature*, ed. P. Unschuld (Dordrecht, London: Kluwer Academic), 141–51, ISBN: 1-55608-041-7. DOI: [10.1007/978-94-009-2701-8\\_13](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-009-2701-8_13).