

PHILOSOPHY OF TRANSLATION

By Elena Nardelli¹

(First published May 31, 2026)

It. *Filosofia della traduzione*; Fr. *Philosophie de la traduction*; Germ. *Philosophie der Übersetzung*; Span. *Filosofía de la traducción*.

Although translation is an essential activity through which philosophical thought is disseminated and handed down, it has rarely been placed at the center of philosophical reflection. Instead, philosophers have often viewed translation as a technical or philological practice, marginal to the discipline's core concerns.

In recent decades, however, a considerable number of studies that can be grouped under the label "philosophy of translation" have sought to address the phenomenon of translation as a fully philosophical problem. Within this body of scholarship, translation is often approached in its interlinguistic sense, though attention has also been given to intra-linguistic translation (Saito 2019) or to translation understood, in a broader sense, as a heuristic for conceptualizing different transformative processes (Guldin 2015).

The philosophy of translation is grounded in an awareness that philosophy is always conducted in language and that linguistic matters are by no means irrelevant to thought. It is particularly attentive to philosophy's specific lexicon and to the layered passages between languages that each term in the philosophical tradition carries with it. The perspective of translation also sheds light on the question of language as such, our relation to otherness, the material conditions of the transmission of thought, and the political dimension that runs through it.

On the one hand, the philosophy of translation presents itself as the final and necessary stage of the linguistic turn that characterized twentieth-century philosophy, in which languages are conceived of in the

¹ Research Center for the Philosophy of Translation (PHILTRA), Padova University



Funded by
the European Union

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No.101064906.

plural. On the other hand, it presents itself as an unavoidable methodological reflection for twenty-first-century philosophy, which cannot but be cross-cultural (Ghilardi 2012).

THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

With the exception of the seminal works by Andrew Benjamin (1989) and Naoki Sakai (1997), a milestone in the philosophy of translation is Barbara Cassin's (ed.) *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, published in French in 2004 under the title *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies. Dictionnaire des Intraduisibles* and, ten years later, in English under the title *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*. A further step in consolidating the field was the founding of the journal *Philosophy of Translation* (Taylor and Francis) in 2025.

On the one hand, the term "philosophy of translation" encompasses works on philosophy *in* translation, mostly structured as case studies or translator's notes addressing the issues and difficulties that arise from translating the philosophy of a particular author into a particular language, sometimes with a historical-philosophical focus. On the other, it encompasses works of philosophy *on* translation, which, often starting from a specific author, offer theoretical reflections on the experience of translation, in dialogue with the more theoretical works of translation studies. Between these two macro-trends, I propose an understanding of philosophy *as* translation, placing translation at the heart of philosophical inquiry, where it functions as a driving force (Nardelli 2021).

The main issues shaping the debate are as follows:

- First, there is a need for systematic theories and philosophies of translation that position translation at the center of philosophical inquiry rather than as a corollary. Such theories must offer a compelling account of translation that is grounded in the practice of translation itself, rather than imposing conceptual frameworks from other domains (Hrnjez 2026; Caramelli 2025).
- Second, there is a need to move beyond the boundaries of Western canons and languages and to construct an intrinsically cross-cultural philosophy – one that recognizes and values the depth of traditions beyond the European, drawing on them to shed new light on shared problems and to enrich questions that emerge within specific intellectual contexts.
- A third element concerns the political dimension of translation, both as a space of mediation and dialogue (Cavell 2025) and as a site in which violence is enacted (Samoyault 2020). From a historical perspective, translation's ability to intervene actively in the mechanisms of language policy is rooted in the role it has played in the construction of modern-day nationalisms (Sakai 1997). In the face of the global anglicization of languages (and ways of life), there is a need for linguistic and epistemic justice that addresses power relations between languages and their associated epistemologies, as well as the resulting marginalization of entire linguistic-cultural contexts within philosophical discourse – particularly in analytic philosophy, where English has come to dominate other linguistic perspectives (Contesi, Chapman, and Sandis 2022).

Further, given that translation has historically been regarded as a reproductive activity associated with “minor” authorship – in combination with the fact that approximately 85 percent of those who work in translation identify as female – the need for reflection on feminist translation practices is urgently needed (Flotow and Farzaneh 2020).

- A fourth open question facing the philosophy of translation in recent years is the issue of machine translation. Since the introduction of neural machine translation in 2015 and the subsequent development of large language models – which have replaced both rule-based approaches and phrase-based statistical machine learning – the quality of machine translation has improved markedly. This profound transformation has had consequences not only for the publishing industry and philosophical practice but also for how we understand and think about translation processes.

PHILOSOPHICAL FRAMEWORKS

Although rooted in questions related to the translation of sacred scriptures (Jerome, Luther) and the translation of Greek philosophy into Latin (Cicero, Bruni), the philosophical debate on translation crystallized around its current categories in the German-language debate between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. During this period, numerous thinkers of the caliber of Herder, Novalis, Goethe, Schleiermacher, W. v. Humboldt, Hölderlin, and the Schlegel brothers were actively engaged in translation, generating important theoretical reflections that were closely tied to discourses on the construction of German identity (Berman 1984).

This argument was taken up in an essay that was central to the philosophical elaboration of the question of translation: Walter Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator,” which served as the preface to his translations of Baudelaire’s *Tableaux Parisiens*. There, he put forward his enigmatic definition of translation as form and posthumous maturity of the original in the era of its survival (Illetterati 2026).

In the second half of the twentieth century, the question of translation found a place – though a marginal one – in both the analytic and the continental traditions, especially in Ortega y Gasset, Quine, Davidson, Heidegger, Gadamer, Cavell, Ricœur, and Derrida.

Willard van Orman Quine approached the concept of meaning – one of the crucial topics of analytic philosophy – through the problem of translation. In the second chapter of *Word and Object* (1960), he defines meaning as “what a sentence shares with its translation” (Quine 2013, 29). Quine imagined a scenario involving radical translation – the translation of a language spoken by a population with whom there has been no prior contact – and, on this basis, advanced the thesis of the indeterminacy of translation, according to which mutually incompatible translations may be equally plausible. This thesis has largely been interpreted as an argument for the indeterminacy of meaning and for holism, leading to ontological relativism (Ervas 2023, 21).

Drawing on Quine’s holistic approach to meaning, Donald Davidson sought to overcome the thesis of the incommensurability of languages and conceptual schemes in favor of their mutual translatability and

interpretability, criticizing what he called the third dogma of empiricism: the dualism between scheme and reality (Davidson 1984). To do so, Davidson engaged with the key concept of translation theory, namely equivalence, which he understood in a processual and non-relational way, such that correspondences remain fluid and alterable.

Martin Heidegger had an ambiguous relationship with translation. On the one hand, he continually translated and retranslated Greek thought, explicitly framing this activity as essential to thinking. In doing so, he advanced a reflective reconceptualization of translation and identified what he called “essential translations” (Heidegger 1997) as epochal watershed moments in Western thought. On the other hand, he condemned translation as a fallback activity necessarily destined to “shipwreck” (Heidegger 1979) and historical translations as stages in the departure from – and misunderstanding of – Greek thought.

Inheriting Heidegger’s gesture while reversing its meaning, Jacques Derrida (2005) rejected the shipwreck paradigm, identifying in translation an antinomic structure and a continuous differential slippage – a movement that delivers the text to an otherness that makes its survival possible.

AN UNDISCIPLINED DISCIPLINE, A NEW PARADIGM

Translation means transcending not only linguistic and cultural but also disciplinary boundaries. This characteristic can in turn give rise to a new paradigm for relations between disciplines (Quaquarelli-Suchet 2017).

Scholarly inquiry into translation has traditionally straddled religious studies, linguistics, and literary theory. In the 1980s, work on translation in these disciplines converged in translation studies, which, drawing on this multifarious legacy, reconfigured existing research trajectories into a new constellation encompassing postcolonial studies (Spivak), critical theory (Bhabha), gender studies (Simon), and semiotics (Nergaard), among others.

Since its inception, psychoanalytic reflection has also contributed to thematizing translation, both as a metaphor or heuristic for understanding psychic realities and through the use of psychoanalytic insights to illuminate the nature of transitive processes and their impact on the subjectivities that carry them out (Laplanche).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- A. Benjamin, *Translation and the Nature of Philosophy: A New Theory of Words*, Abingdon - New York, Routledge Revivals, 1989.
- W. Benjamin, *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. IV/1, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1972: 9-21.
- A. Berman, *L'épreuve de l'étranger*, Paris, Gallimard, 1984.

- E. Caramelli, *Philosophical Diegesis and Translation: Philosophy as a Second Life*, "Philosophy of Translation", 1 (2025): 1-13.
- S. Cavell, *Walden in Tokyo*, "Journal of Philosophy of Education", 59 (2025): 825-834.
- F. Contesi, L. Chapman, C. Sandis, *Analytic Philosophy Has a Language Problem: The Roots of Its Contemporary Decadence*, IAI News, 2022.
- D. Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1984.
- J. Derrida, *Qu'est-ce qu'une traduction « relevante »?*, Paris, L'Herne, 2005.
- F. Ervas, *Translation in Analytic Philosophy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2023.
- L. von Flotow, F. Farzaneh (eds.), *Translating Women: Different Voices and New Horizons*, London, Routledge, 2020.
- M. Ghilardi, *Filosofia dell'interculturalità*, Brescia, Morcelliana, 2012.
- R. Guldin, *Translation as Metaphor*, London-New York, Routledge, 2015.
- M. Heidegger, *Der Satz vom Grund*, HGA 10, Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann, 1997.
- M. Heidegger, *Heraklit*, HGA 55, Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann, 1979.
- S. Hrnjez, *Translation as Concept. Universality, Negativity, Time*, London-Berlin-New York, Springer, 2026.
- L. Illetterati, *Trasformare l'identico. Ovvero: traduzione e metamorfosi*, Macerata, EUM – Edizioni Università di Macerata, 2026.
- E. Nardelli, *Al bivio della traduzione. Heidegger e Derrida*, Padova, Padova University Press, 2021.
- J. Ortega y Gasset, *Miseria y splendor de la traducción*, "La Nación" de Buenos Aires, 1937.
- L. Quaquarelli, M. Suchet (eds.), *Indiscipliner la traduction*, "Écritures", 9 (2017).
- W.v.O. Quine, *Word and Object*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2013.
- P. Ricœur, *Sur la traduction*, Paris, Bayard, 2004.
- N. Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity, On "Japan" and Cultural Nationalism*, Minneapolis – London, University of Minnesota, 1997.
- N. Saito, *American Philosophy in Translation*, London – New York, Rowman&Littlefield, 2019.
- T. Samoyault, *Traduction et violence*, Paris, Seuil, 2020.

HOW TO QUOTE THIS ENTRY

E. Nardelli, Translation (Philosophy of), "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Spring 2026 Edition, URL = <https://lexicon.mimesisjournals.com/archive/2026/spring/PhilosophyopTranslation.pdf>, DOI: 10-7413/18258630161.

Please note that this URL is fixed, since it belongs to *ILAe*'s archived edition. This allows readers to quote a stable document for academic purposes.

This entry also belongs to the ninth volume of *ILAe*'s printed edition. Each issue of this edition collects the *ILAe*'s Spring and Autumn online editions per year. The proper reference of the printed edition is:

E. Nardelli, *Philosophy of Translation*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Vol. 9, Milano, Mimesis, 2026.