



Book Review

Searls, D. (2024). *The philosophy of translation*. Yale University Press.

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Damion Searls' *The philosophy of translation* is a recent and noteworthy addition to the study of translation. While the author deliberately distances himself from being labeled a theorist or his work as theoretical, its significance lies in his unique perspective as a celebrated professional translator and writer. Searls has an impressive track record of translating works from German, Norwegian, French, and Dutch by renowned authors like Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Proust, Rilke, Saša Stanišić, Jelinek, Mann, Modiano, and Jon Fosse, among others. This experience lends authenticity to his reflections, which resonate with the practical realities of translation practice and the translation market. One persistent criticism of academic translation theories is their frequent detachment from the realities of translation. Many theories fail to address the challenges translators face in practice, often producing work that is "unusable and, in some cases, nearly unreadable" for the practitioners themselves (p. 15). Searls openly critiques this "young academic field" in his book, aiming to bridge the gap between theory and practice. He writes that "The past forty or fifty years have seen an explosion of academic studies of translation, creating an institutional position for work that often, unfortunately, remains divorced from real practice" (p. 15). However, in recent decades, this trend appears to be changing, marking a very welcome shift. The ideas of professional translators have been covered and presented in various books, offering insights into their philosophies of translation and perceptions of their craft (see, for example, Bellos, 2011; Grossman, 2010; Polizzotti, 2018; Washbourne, 2025). These works, along with Searls', help bridge the gap between theory and practice, enriching the understanding of translation from both scholarly and practical perspectives.

Searls describes his book as an effort to explore the nature and meaning of translation while remaining firmly grounded in the lived experience of translating, avoiding an academic tone or an audience limited to academia. Notably, Searls distances himself from conventional academic methodologies, choosing not to engage in the exhaustive literature reviews and theoretical positioning typical of academic works. By choosing the term philosophy for the title, Searls emphasizes a broader, reflective approach to translation, one that avoids the prescriptive and prohibitive nature of theories and appeals to

practitioners who may view theory with skepticism. This approach reflects his conviction that translation theory often comes across as “flashy,” “prescriptive,” “prohibitive,” “plainly abstruse,” and of little use to translators, echoing Polizzotti’s critique of the field (Polizzotti, 2018, p. xiii, as cited in Searls, 2024, p.17).

In the opening paragraphs of the Introduction, Searls establishes his central premise: translation is fundamentally a form of writing. He posits that translators create new works for new contexts, though the process is rarely straightforward. Translators’ goals—be they fidelity to the original or freedom of adaptation—inevitably influence their choices. Drawing on Proust’s description of reading, Searls shifts the focus from the translator’s process to the act of reading itself, advocating for a mode of “reading like a translator” (p. 11). Searls’ deliberate emphasis on ‘reading’ is significant, as seeing translation as a form of reading is the essence of his philosophy. This perspective serves as a recurring theme throughout many chapters of the book, reinforcing the idea that translation is an interpretive act deeply rooted in understanding and engaging with texts. He argues that reading, akin to perception, is a complex interplay between self and world. Just as we see and interpret the world through our unique perspectives, we read and interpret texts individually. For Searls, translating is essentially an act of translating one’s reading of the original text. He deliberately prefers the humility of ‘reading’ over terms like ‘analyzing’ or ‘understanding,’ suggesting that while deep reading allows for insight, it does not claim superiority over other interpretations (p. 15).

This book is organized into two halves. The first half, consisting of four chapters, delves into ideas and philosophical arguments about the phenomenon of translation. The second half is rich with examples drawn from the author’s own translations, presented across three chapters and concluded with a coda that encapsulates his opinions.

In the first chapter, The History of Translation, Searls begins by exploring the origins of the term translation. He favors the term translating language over target language, finding the latter somewhat aggressive and overly passive, as it suggests merely transferring something from one place to another. Nevertheless, he acknowledges the prevalence of the source-target paradigm, tracing its origins to the German theologian and philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher. Schleiermacher’s seminal work identified two fundamental methods of translation, framing the translator as a mediator bridging two distinct and separate individuals: the author and the reader (Schleiermacher, 1963, as cited in Searls, 2024). Searls draws attention to how this dichotomy mirrors others in translation studies, such as Lawrence Venuti’s concepts of domesticating and foreignizing strategies. Both Venuti and Schleiermacher, Searls observes, grappled with the inherent challenges of translation. Venuti famously described translation as a “forcible [and thus violent] replacement” and advocated for foreignization to mitigate this damage (Venuti, 2008, p. 14). Searls, engaging with Venuti’s ideas, contends that no translation can be wholly foreign, suggesting that a domesticating translation could acquire foreignizing qualities through critical examination. Ultimately, Searls finds both terms imprecise, proposing that foreignizing translation may simply involve showing respect for the original text. Searls also references Berman’s essay on the historical progression of terms that eventually converged on translation, such as *traditio*, *translatio*, and *traductio* (Berman, 1988). He analyzes how their diverse connotations have contributed to contemporary ambiguities in translation concepts. Additionally, Searls cites Schleiermacher’s evocative

metaphor likening language—or the mother tongue—to a “mother,” while translation, influenced by the translator’s cultural and linguistic context, is likened to a “father.” This metaphor implies that translation generates an alternate version of the original text, as though the author were shaped by a different linguistic and cultural background. Finally, Searls aligns Schleiermacher’s preference for moving the reader toward the author with Wilhelm von Humboldt’s view. Humboldt argued that the role of translation is “to appropriate to the language and the spirit of a nation what it does not possess, or what it possesses in a different way” (Humboldt, 1992, as cited in Searls, 2024, p. 33).

In the second chapter, *Realignment and Strangeness*, Searls critiques the frameworks of Schleiermacher and Venuti for relying on monolingual, monocultural assumptions, which imply that each culture is bound exclusively to its respective language. He rejects the notion of two distinct, separate contexts in favor of a concept he calls realignment. This approach reimagines translation as the translator’s act of navigating within a linguistically and culturally diverse community, reading a text in one language and rendering it in another without rigidly adhering to the traditional source-target dichotomy. To encapsulate this perspective, Searls coins the term ‘accuperation’ as an alternative to describe the translation process. Searls further argues that the notion of something being entirely foreign is inherently flawed, as true foreignness would render understanding impossible. This perspective leads to one of the book’s most intriguing arguments, where Searls connects translation to Formalism. He proposes replacing the domesticating-foreignizing binary with the familiar-unfamiliar dichotomy, which he believes better captures the essence of translation. For Searls, the unfamiliar is preferable because it aligns with the Formalist objective to “make the stone stony again”—a concept drawn from Viktor Shklovsky’s idea of defamiliarization (Searls, 2024, p. 49; Shklovsky, 2016, p. 80). Through this lens, Searls champions the *étranger* text, arguing that its value lies not in whether it is an original or a translation but in its ability to evoke freshness and strangeness. This approach liberates translation from the restrictive domesticating-foreignizing debate, instead celebrating the unfamiliar as a desirable outcome, making the preference for foreignization more truthful and resonant. One point worth mentioning is that introducing the concept of defamiliarization to translation is not entirely new. For instance, Venuti highlights how Nott used translation to signal cultural and textual differences, deliberately selecting marginalized or neglected foreign texts, such as works by the Persian poet Hafiz, as an anti-imperialist act (Nott, 1787; Venuti, 2008). Similarly, as Venuti discussed, Richard Burton’s version of *The Arabian nights* employed archaic language drawn from canonical authors in unexpected contexts, serving both as a critique of Victorian moral hypocrisy and as a strategy to signal cultural and textual differences, though it is also often critiqued for its orientalist perspective (Burton, 1885; Venuti, 2008). By contrast, for Searls, the choice of the unfamiliar seems to be mostly a literary one, akin to writing an original text, aimed at achieving what Shklovsky describes as helping the reader ‘see’ rather than merely ‘recognize,’ or, as Stein metaphorically puts it, making the rose red again (Shklovsky, 2016; Stein, 1947).

In the third chapter, *Perception and Affordance*, drawing on Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*, Searls critiques Cartesian intellectualism and Newtonian empiricism, presenting perception as inherently intentional (Merleau-Ponty, 2010). In phenomenological terms, intentionality does not

signify deliberate action but rather the implicit or explicit orientations that perception entails. Searls introduces a unique and intriguing element to his philosophical discussion by linking Merleau-Ponty's ideas to James J. Gibson's concept of affordances, originally developed in the context of aviation psychology (Gibson, 2014). In Searls' argument, affordance transcends its original denotative meaning and refers instead to the inherent utility of an object or text. For instance, as Searls explains, a chair affords a place to sit—it is defined not by its physical properties but by its utility. Extending this notion to translation, Searls contends that translators are never entirely free in their work. Just as a chair remains a chair even if repurposed as a table, a translator's efforts are bound to the affordances of the original text. This parallel underscores the constraints imposed by the source material, emphasizing the inevitable interplay between the original text's utility and the translator's perceptual agency.

In the fourth chapter of the book, *Baseline and Constellation*, Searls insightfully acknowledges that readers typically engage with literary works through the lens of a 'canon,' or what Bakhtin (1986) terms 'speech genres,' and what Wittgenstein (1953) refers to as 'language games'. He argues that these variations in reading reveal deeper consistencies—what does not change. According to Searls, translation operates on two levels. First, it redirects the communicative flow to a new audience, altering the language of the text (e.g., from Russian to English). Second, it recreates the arc of the original, producing a new text that embodies the same movement but from a different linguistic baseline. This dual nature of translation helps explain the notion that a translation must be "the same as but different than" the original: a different arrow, but the same arc (p. 75). Furthermore, Searls asserts that the baseline of translation is not language itself, but rather the expectations of the readers. Drawing on Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, he emphasizes that it is the speakers (or readers) who both shape and are shaped by language (Bakhtin, 1981).

In the fifth chapter, entitled *Translating Words*, the author compellingly argues that the task of translation is far more nuanced than simply finding a one-to-one equivalent for words in another language. Instead, all words must be seen as "part of a complex utterance" (p. 87). The author reinforces this view by referencing Emily Wilson's 2019 Twitter post, in which she emphasized that translation is not limited to a few hard-to-translate words—a misconception often held by laypeople. Rather, every single word in a text demands careful analysis during the translation process. This perspective is further supported by an anecdote involving Proust, who, despite allegedly having limited proficiency in English, is said to have remarked on his translations of Ruskin, "I don't claim to know English; I claim to know Ruskin," (Tadié, 1999, as cited in Searls, 2024, p. 91). Interestingly, the author contrasts this stance with Bellos's strong opposition to Proust's claim. Bellos dismissed this idea as "rubbish" during a 2020 talk (Sebald, June 29, 2020, as cited in Searls, 2024, p. 91). This divergence of opinion highlights the vibrant debates among professional translators. Searls, however, counters Bellos's critique, arguing that there are forms of knowledge beyond linguistic fluency that can significantly enrich translation. He points out that some authors prefer their works to be translated by individuals with less proficiency in the original language, as such translators may prioritize capturing the spirit or intent—what he later refers to as the force—of the text rather than strictly adhering to linguistic accuracy. Ultimately, the author advocates for a balanced approach, acknowledging that "there are straw men to be found on both sides" (p. 94). The author concludes

by addressing the oft-debated issue of untranslatable words, firmly asserting that all words are translatable. He contends that meaning can always be conveyed, even if it requires more than a single word. In this regard, he somewhat echoes Newmark's assertion: "... everything without exception is translatable; the translator cannot afford the luxury of saying that something cannot be translated" (Newmark, 1988, p. 6).

In Chapter 6, *Translating Force*, the author begins by discussing the perspectives of Cicero, Horace, and Saint Jerome on translation, contrasting the 'word-for-word' and 'sense-for-sense' approaches, with the latter being deemed preferable to Nida's concept of equivalent effect. Searls critiques the 'same effect' strategy, arguing that it is both limited and directional, as the intended effect can vary depending on the target audience. Moreover, under this approach, the translator's focus should not solely be on the text itself; rather, the translator's primary concern should be to establish a relationship with the target audience, as the effect ultimately arises from this interaction. Searls advocates for the view that the effect of a translation is largely shaped by the expectations and cultural context of the target audience, rather than simply replicating the effect of the original text. Later in the chapter, he distinguishes four qualities—sound, register, association, and movement—providing several insightful examples. A working translator, Searls argues, would seldom, if ever, focus on these aspects individually; instead, they engage with all of them simultaneously during the translation process, weaving them together as part of their overall approach to the text. He concludes by suggesting that the true essence of translation, its 'force,' encompasses all these aspects, representing the dynamic energy and direction that a translation conveys.

In the penultimate chapter, the author explores the concept of faithfulness in translation. He asserts that "no translation is either free or faithful," a claim grounded in his earlier assertion that translation is essentially a form of reading (p. 141). Searls argues that "no one translates a text—they translate their reading of the text" (p. 148). As an inherent consequence of this perspective, he maintains that "all translators are faithful, but to different things" since reading, by nature, cannot be unfaithful (p. 147). Searls also references Karen Emmerich's argument that no original text is inherently 'original' in a pure or fixed sense. Instead, "originals" are constructed through editorial and interpretive processes, such as selecting a source, resolving variations, or even reconstructing fragments. Even when a text appears fixed, each translator will still interpret it differently (Emmerich, 2017). Searls concludes by emphasizing that translation, like any other human endeavor, involves complex ethical dilemmas. These issues are not solved by translation, nor do they introduce entirely novel challenges. Ultimately, the ethical complexities of translation are akin to those encountered in all aspects of life.

In the coda of his book, Searls opens by quoting and critiquing Frost's famous slogan, "Poetry is what gets lost in translation" (p. 162). He argues that the issue lies not with translation itself but with the way texts are read by anyone other than the original poet. Searls also addresses contemporary concerns about AI translations, such as those produced by ChatGPT and similar systems. He expresses confidence that he will never fear losing his job to these machines, as, despite their advancements, there is one thing they are incapable of: *READING*. Finally, Searls reflects on the various metaphors used to describe translation practice. While acknowledging that these metaphors capture different aspects of translation, he ultimately concludes that they are unhelpful and unnecessary. He closes his book by emphasizing that translation is an

engaging and insightful way to interact with a text, allowing readers to experience the same connection as the original.

At its core, Searls' philosophy of translation can be summarized as viewing translation as a form of reading and the translator as a reader, emphasizing the interpretive and dynamic nature of the practice. However, it is important to note that seeing translation as a form of reading is not a new idea. Some theorists have previously proposed similar concepts, albeit in subtly different ways, among the most famous being Spivak, who described translation as "the most intimate act of reading," emphasizing the deep connection between the translator and the text (Spivak, 1993/2012, p. 313). Schulte, quoting and translating Hans Georg Gadamer, also stated that "Reading is already translation, and translation is translation for the second time" (Schulte, n.d., p. 1). Additionally, others have examined the complex connection between translation and reading. For example, Umberto Eco highlights the translator's role as a reader and interpreter, arguing that translation is not simply a comparison between two languages but an interpretation of two separate texts in different linguistic contexts (Eco, 2001, p. 14, as cited in Bassnett, 2014, p. 105-106). Meanwhile, Vayenas argues that translation represents the most meticulous form of reading, asserting that translators possess exceptional reading skills (Vayenas, 2010, p. 132, as cited in Bassnett, 2014, p. 106). However, in Searls' view, the term 'reading' carries a more humble connotation, suggesting that a translator's reading is not necessarily the best or most superior. The strength of Searls' book, *The philosophy of translation*, lies in its refreshing departure from traditional academic discourse on translation. It offers accessibility and grounded insights, and rejects abstraction in favor of practical relevance. Searls provides a deeply personal and reflective exploration of translation as an art form, making the book an invaluable resource for translators and anyone interested in the nuances of language and meaning.

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