



Book review

**Bassnett, S. & Johnston, D. (Eds.) (2025).
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Susan Bassnett and David Johnston's edited volume *Debates in Translation Studies* is a timely collection that situates translation at the very heart of contemporary cultural, technological and political debates. The twelve essays gathered in this volume, written by leading figures in the field, address what it means to think about Translation Studies “from the complicated perspective of now” (p. 8). What emerges is not only a state-of-the-art overview of current scholarship but also a manifesto for why translational thinking matters today more than ever.

At the outset, Bassnett poses the fundamental question: “how we talk about translation as a representational practice and, deriving from that, what it means to think in terms that may be considered ‘translational’” (p. 1). This interrogation sets the tone for the volume, which presents translation not as a mechanical operation of transferring meaning from one language to another, but rather as a deeply transformative and resistant practice, one that unsettles assumptions and creates new epistemologies. In this sense, the volume continues—and complicates—the polemical work of Lawrence Venuti. As Bassnett and Johnston remind us, Venuti's *Contra Instrumentalism* rejected the notion of translation as “the reproduction or transfer of an invariant form, meaning or effect” (p. 2). Instead, translation is “radically transformative” (p. 2), always shaped by cultural, historical and ideological mediations.

A recurring motif across the essays is translation as a practice of opposition and deviance, insisting that “translation is always at the forefront of an epistemology of resistance” (p. 4), not only against linguistic simplification but also against hegemonic power structures, colonial legacies and technological reductionism. The interdisciplinarity of Translation Studies—what Roland Barthes once described as the abandoning of easy security—is here reimagined as a two-way process: translation unsettles disciplinary boundaries while itself being reshaped by other fields, from trauma studies and decolonial theory to data science and artificial intelligence (p. 4). This insistence on openness and mutation—echoing Terry Smith's notion of an open-form constellation—underscores the collection's dynamic intellectual energy.

The temporal dimension of translation provides another unifying thread. Bassnett strikingly observes: “to talk about translation is always to talk about time and its defining relationship with our lives and where those lives take place.

Translation, we might venture therefore, is the word in a space-time continuum” (p. 7). This conceptualization places translation within the rhythms of history and memory, reminding us of W.G. Sebald’s docufictional layering of temporalities. Translation, in this sense, does not merely carry texts across languages but weaves together past and present, individual and collective, subjective experience and historical trauma. Such a view resonates strongly with Sharon Deane-Cox’s essay on translation and trauma, which highlights how translation can mediate unspeakable histories, offering strategies for representing suffering without collapsing difference.

Equally compelling is the attention to translation and cartography in Federico Italiano’s essay. He reminds us that map-making is a key metaphor for translation, while cautioning that the map is not the territory (p. 8). Both maps and translations are selective, interpretative and ideological acts that mediate our access to reality rather than transparently reflecting it. This insight dovetails with Paul Bandia’s exploration of reparative translation, which explicitly confronts the legacies of colonization and slavery. Drawing on Frantz Fanon, Bandia insists that shaping the future requires absorbing the meanings of the past (p. 74). Here, translation is conceived as a reparative practice, a means of rewriting history to seek justice, equity and fairness.

Michael Cronin extends this line of thought into the environmental sphere, using the term “translational rift” to describe the ruptures in humanity’s relationship with the ecosystems that sustain life (p. 78). By linking translation with decolonisation, slavery and environmental crisis, Cronin positions it as a tool of critical engagement in the Anthropocene. His essay exemplifies the collection’s central ambition: to think translation not as a niche academic subdiscipline, but as a crucial interpretative framework for our age of global upheaval.

The technological dimension of translation is addressed most directly by Dorothy Kenny and Neil Sadler. Kenny examines the role of artificial intelligence, neural machine translation (NMT) and large language models (LLMs). While acknowledging their growing importance, she highlights serious limitations: “English-centricity,” bias against “low-resource languages,” the propensity of AI systems to “hallucinate” and their potential to compromise human safety (p. 93). For her, the central issue is not whether machines will replace translators, but how societies integrate these technologies within broader socio-cultural, legal and ethical contexts. Literary translators, she notes, remain especially resistant to machine translation: as the French association ATLAS insists, “Literary translators translate texts embedded in their cultural, social and historical context... No machine can do this without a significant human effort” (p. 98).

Sadler’s essay complements Kenny’s by focusing on datafication. He argues that datafication itself is a translational process: databases and algorithms mediate vast amounts of information by transforming it into usable data. Yet “datafication does not reduce the importance of human interpretation” (p. 118). Indeed, translation scholars are well-placed to theorize the role of analytics translators who bridge the gap between technical specialists and wider audiences. This provocative rethinking of translation beyond language into the realm of information management demonstrates the far-reaching potential of translational thinking.

Lisha Xu’s contribution brings a vital non-Western perspective, tracing the development of Translation Studies in China and its complex relationship with Western theories (p. 124). She identifies the anxiety of misrecognition that results from Eurocentric distortions of Chinese culture, calling for more

collaborative translation projects to resist “wilful distortions” (p. 137) and to represent China on its own terms. Catherine Boyle echoes this call for collaboration in her essay on theatre translation, stressing the practical necessity of translation in today’s interconnected world and the ways in which collaborative practice brings diverse perspectives into fruitful conjunction. Hers is also the prize for best title: “The word stuck in the throat” (p. 141).

Taken together, these essays demonstrate the continued relevance of Venuti’s longstanding critique of the invisibility of translation. The collection insists that translation is never a neutral activity: it always interprets, rewrites and reframes texts in new cultural moments. As Bassnett notes, “the fallacy of assuming that any text can be reproduced ‘faithfully’ through translation” (p. 20) is one of the discipline’s central debates. Even so, the category of “faithfulness” continues to haunt discussions, whether in the context of AI, decolonial politics or intercultural collaboration. What makes *Debates in Translation Studies* particularly valuable is its breadth. Each essay is both deeply engaged with specialized debates and written in a way that speaks to a broader intellectual community. The collection will appeal to scholars of language and literature, cultural studies, history, philosophy, media studies and beyond. But it also has much to offer practitioners—translators, interpreters, creative writers and educators—who grapple with the challenges of representing difference in their everyday work. In sum, this is a collection that both surveys and advances the field. It shows how translation, far from being a peripheral or technical concern, is central to the ways we understand language, identity, culture, technology and ecology in the twenty-first century. It also makes a strong case for translation as an intellectual method, a probing and unsettling practice that resists closure, insists on complexity and embraces difference. For all those interested in how we negotiate meaning across boundaries—be they linguistic, cultural, disciplinary or technological—*Debates in Translation Studies* is an indispensable read.