Reviving Humanities Through Translation: Translating the Other, Translating the Self

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ABSTRACT

Translation Studies, alongside modern languages and many other disciplines in humanities, is declining. As a journal dedicated to early-career scholars and the voices of new researchers, we, the editorial board of *New Voices in Translation Studies*, ask what the fresh intellectual energy in our discipline might contribute against this trend. Central to this discussion is the threat posed by the rise of an acultural ideology, a logic found in current society that commodifies knowledge while flattening cultural specificity. While emerging public narratives suggest a move toward uniformity, our personal, lived reality remains superdiversified. This contradiction runs the risk of silencing the marginalised and turning individuals into social nonsubjects. In this editorial, we argue that translation, understood as both an act of ethical hospitality and a somatic practice of self-knowledge, holds the promise of reviving the humanities in an age of alienation.

KEYWORDS: aculturalism, Arts and Humanities, experiential translation, semioethics, superdiversity

Strating from 2026, *New Voices in Translation Studies* is making two major changes. First, we have decided to welcome a third, special issue. This year, the theme will be "**Translation as Resistance, Resilience and Activism: Voices from Palestine and Beyond**". Our guest editors, Noureddine Krimat and Anissa Daoudi, and contributors are working hard to make sure the special issue published before the end of the year. Second, we intend to make better use of the editorial, to allow our editors make more significant contributions to the current disciplinary debate. I am grateful and honoured to inaugurate this new format with the current piece of writing.

1. 'Death-Wave' of University Programmes and Instrumentalisation of the Humanities

Universities are shutting down humanities programmes, among which modern languages and translation departments are some of the worst hit. From the shocking suspension of Middlebury Translation and Interpreting Graduate Programmes in the United States, which has long been seen as the dream programme for anyone who aspired to become a professional interpreter, to the recent challenges faced by British higher education institutions like the University of Nottingham and the University of Leicester, it seems modern languages and translation are no longer needed, either for universities' financial sustainability, or for students pursuing employment. In China, some of the most prestigious universities are making similar moves: as announced by its vice-chancellor Jin Li [金力] (2025), Fudan University proposed an "Surgical-style reform [大手术式的改革]" aiming to cut the recruitment of students in arts and humanities. Likewise, Sichuan University has recently cut 39 of its courses, among which are Japanese and International Chinese Education, the former was once an A-graded major in China University Rankings. In a recent article circulating on Chinese social media platforms, the author, pen-named Linghu [令狐] (2026) uses the term "death-wave [死亡潮]" to describe the increasing number of university programmes

being discontinued : Citing data from the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, Linghu reports that "in the recent 5 years, Chinese universities combined have cut more than 4000 Bachelors' programmes".

Many of the decisions are economics-related. In other words, language and translation programmes, like many other programmes in arts and humanities, are instrumentalised. This means that the students' consideration for choosing what to study, institutions' evaluation of what to fund, and universities' decision on which courses to cut depend on the money-related factors: how efficiently and effectively do these courses make money? The question is, is there anything we should care about aside from money and economic value? This question lies in the root of Arts and Humanities, and if the answer is negative, then cutting programmes and scholars from the system seems naturally the right thing to do. What I would like to argue, however, is that ignoring values beyond mere economics, presents a huge threat to our society and, to an extent, also to our living.

Kohei Saito (2020) contrasts "value", which is economically defined, and "use-value", which marks the actual effectiveness of things – for example food that enables people to keep nutritious, to propose that the only way to sustainability and better welfare of the entire human race is to slow down economic development and turn to use-value. He does this to argue that the human race should transition to what he terms as a use-value-based economy (Saito 2020: 203), featuring what he calls "degrowth communism". While I do not seek to dive into the debate over capitalism vs communism, the inspiration from Saito's degrowth manifesto is that economic development will eventually lead the human society to an end block or a dead end.

While Saito's focus is on sustainability, the same vocabulary of "use-value" was adopted and developed much earlier by Jean-Francois Lyotard (1979/1984), who, in a report presented to Conseil des Universités du Québec, analysed how knowledge was commodified in "postmodern" society. In such a society, Lyotard (ibid.: 4) asserts, the status of knowledge is altered as such, that it "is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production: in both cases, the goal is exchange," that is, "[k]knowledge ceases to be an end in itself, it loses its 'use-value'" (ibid.: 5). The warning against the commodification of knowledge is more relevant to my discussion here. If the logic behind erasing languages, translation, and humanities from the tertiary education map is that statistically, they are not efficient for economic development, Lyotard's warning becomes especially relevant: learning is "circulating along the same lines as money, instead of for its 'educational' value", and there will be differences only between "units of knowledge exchanged in a daily maintenance framework (the reconstitution of the work force, 'survival') versus funds of knowledge dedicated to optimizing the performance of a project" (Lyotard 1984: 6).

The economic-value, rather than use-value, based approach to development and the result of treating those that do not directly generate such values as "redundancies", and arts and humanities, unfortunately, earn less money than their counterparts in universities. I myself argue that an approach which deems specific fields of learning such as arts and humanities as 'redundancies' due to 'earning' less money than other fields of study is 'instrumentalism. Obviously I am drawing inspiration here from Lawrence Venuti (2019), who, even though not committing to criticise the contemporary knowledge production and dissemination, makes an important observation about translation being instrumentalised with discourses around truth and accuracy because "they imply unmediated access to source-text invariants, which are then made the criteria that determine error or inaccuracy" (Venuti 2019: 17). That is, Venuti speculates a trend of believing in the unmediated access to so-called truth in the

translation process, and such belief, taken into the discourse of knowledge access, means that knowledge is believed to possess the property of being exchanged in its full-form rather than generated in specific societies and cultures by way of education.

2. Monoculturalism and Superdiversity

Monetising educational knowledge as discussed above results in a trend of monoculturalism and a long-held belief that, unlike studies in humanities, scientific research is acultural. This is, I believe, a detrimental ideology that affects not only the development of universities but our world as a whole. Indeed, quite contrary to this, we live in a world that is ever so diverse because of the possibilities – and, at times, necessities – of migration and integration, and acculturation, a situation that is referred to by Steven Vertovec (2007) as "superdiversity". What we have in front of us, then, is a pair of contradicting norms: on the one hand, there is the belief that knowledge, or at least certain kinds of knowledge, is accessed without interference of cultural influence, and on the other, a society where cultural differences seem to be the social norm. Carefully viewing both sides of the social reality, and understanding what problems such a contradiction may cause, highlights the need for reviving humanities in current age.

First, let us consider the issue of aculturalism more closely. In the course of development of science and technology, and in many branches of the technology industry, people typically regard themselves as culturally neutral – in other words, they see themselves as "acultural", the term developed by anthropologists (another programme that is under the threat of being cut among universities globally) Gershon and Taylor (2008) in introducing their special column "culture in the space of no culture". Gershon and Taylor argue that culture has become a label people working in

a range of institutions use to signify others, so that these people "take the institutional context for granted and do not consider its particular forms, forums, patterns, and practices to be cultural. Instead, in these institutional contexts, a select few outsiders get defined as the bearers of culture" (2008: 417).

The previous discussion on the issue of instrumentalising translation and language education – and, indeed, the university education as a whole – as economic-value extraction, and the consequential ideology of aculturalism should be built on an even broader advancement of our society: that of science and technology, especially the uproar of artificial intelligence (AI) and large language models (LLMs). Even though it may not be the case that the development of AI directly leads to the decline of university programmes in languages and translation – for example, Middlebury denied that their decision of closing the programmes was a result of AI development – there is no denial that it contributes as a factor. In a broader picture, the development of technology, as theorised by Lyotard (1979/1984), is deemed to be the direct cause for the commercialisation of knowledge (Lyotard and Brügger 2001: 81) as outlined in section 1. Similarly, Ernst Friedrich Schumacher (1973) warns us about inhumanisation in industries with the development of technology, where he outlines a critique that the development of technology "eliminate(s) the human factor" (Schumacher 1973: 61). While Lyotard's and Schumacher's critiques were articulated some half a century ago, this worrying trend has never slowed down with the rapid development of technology. Recently, for example, David M. Berry and James Stockman (2024) revisited Schumacher's critique and applied it to the age of generative AI, trying to find a way of resistance against, or "a powerful way to consider alternatives" to, "Silicon Valley-style ideologies of digital transformation" (Berry and Stockman 2024: 452). Not directly linking to Lyotard or Schumacher but referring to Marxist critiques of labour, Juan A. Roche Cárcel (2021) identifies the impact of new technologies in modern society as such, that "with the machine-robot, workers become increasingly dispensable,

which is added to their alienation, to their social disappropriation, and, in short, to their transformation into social nonsubjects" (Cárcel 2021).

Either way, the critique of acultural and inhumanised industry or the Marxist alienation that turns workers into nonsubjects are related to translation. The denial of culture, the elimination of humanisation in the workplace or in society as a whole, and the loss of subjectivity all point to an ideology that highlights monoculturalism, that is, differences, whether individually speaking or collectively speaking, are non-existent. In terms of translation and language, such a way of facilitating the commodification of knowledge means that the technological apparatus must first strip language of its cultural specification, thereby instrumentalising it. As a result, the necessity for translation is erased because if there is only one culture (or no culture at all), there are no differences that need to be mediated.

However, while this logic of extraction seeks to flatten the world into a series of calculable exchanges by instrumentalising language and ignoring institutional ideological influences, the lived reality of human interaction remains as a stark contrast to such over-simplification. This invites us to recognise the world we inhabit as a superdiverse one, and increasingly so. In other words, in a globalised world today, society is ever more characterised by "the three Ss and three Ps of superdiversity: the Scale, Size, and Spread of migration-driven diversification and the Politics, Power, and Policy conditioning the contexts in which diversification takes place – together with their manifold interconnections" (Meissner, Signona, and Vertovec 2026: 5). If we encounter the world in our everyday life with its many faces of difference, and understand the ever-growing mobility of people and culture, the threat of mono-/aculturalism emerges: since every difference is flattened into singularity, there will necessarily be people turned invisible, voices suppressed. Ushnish Sengupta (2021: 49–

50) highlights two forms of cultural bias in such acultural models, one being "the male-dominated, patriarchal culture of algorithm development" and the other, "the dominance of an American and European culture of algorithm development". These are but two examples of hidden threats if paradigms of acultural ideology and commercialisation of knowledge continue to develop. As Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio (2025: 13) point out, current globalisation is configured by the dominant tendency to "homologation – social, political, broadly cultural homologation", as a result, the "dialogism structural to the sign is largely repressed and translation processes that favour the development of linguistic consciousness thus obstacled" (Petrilli and Ponzio 2025: 13). Facing such suppression, education in humanities, and especially in languages and translation is not only necessary but urgent.

3. Reviving Humanities: Translating Others and Translating Selves

I hope the previous discussion has made it clear that if the acultural ideology threatens the dialogical relationship between individuals and endangers the wellbeing of the diverse and marginalised members of societies, then translation studies, the very discipline that focuses on the suppressed dialogical relationships, holds the hope of reviving the humanities in the current age. In particular, young and emerging scholars, whose contributions make this journal an important participant in the broader disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary debate, are encouraged to come to the centre stage of such revival. But how can translation do that? What use-value does translation hold? I would propose that, as an inherently born dialogical process, translation is an ethical practice that takes the wellbeing of whoever are the Others and the Self into consideration. That is, the revival of humanities operates through two interconnected dimensions of translation: the ethical hospitality of translating others and the reflexive, somatic process of translating selves.

3.1 Translating Others: Towards a Semioethics

Instead of instrumentalism, Venuti (2019) offers a hermeneutic model. In such a model, translation "generates the concept of mediation, namely, that the linguistic and cultural differences constituting that text are not immediately accessible in a translation but always reworked to be comprehended and affective in the translating culture." To translate, therefore, is inherently to bear differences in mind and acknowledge the impossibility of direct access. This model directly responds to the ideologies of monoculturalism and commercialisation of education by virtue of respecting and acknowledging the cultural nuances and differences. Such respect is not only a practical operation but, perhaps more importantly, an ethical gesture. The ethical implication of honouring the differences and, by translating, inviting the differences into one's realm of knowledge (rather than selling the knowledge), is characterised by what Paul Ricoeur (2006: 19–20) calls "linguistic hospitality". He defined this as "the act of inhabiting the word of the Other paralleled by the act of receiving the word of the Other into one's own home, one's own dwelling". But the implication goes beyond the linguistic inference in the quote to the much wider, superdiverse semiosphere of our society.

Arts and aesthetics have long possessed this ethical power of translation: Zachary Simpson (2026), for example, enquires into "the ways in which life as art is consistently formulated as a rejection of, and form of resistance to, dominant or administered realities" (7). However, as knowledge is increasingly commercialised and regarded computable, aesthetic values become more and more marginalised. Here is a tragedy: Durham is a city I personally hold very dear to my heart as my first home in the UK – and a town with splendid view even without my personal history: Bill Bryson (1995) would tell any stranger "if you've never been to Durham, go at once! Take my car! It's wonderful"! Durham used to host a biennial Lumiere festival, featuring creative and magical pieces of art of lights. I use 'used to host' here because, unfortunately, we

witnessed its suspension last year. In a report relating to its closure, Helen Marriage wrote a powerful piece for *The Guardian* to express her disappointment, and here I set out her words in full:

> You can and should count jobs, exports, return on investment and audience numbers. But you can't count what it feels like to stand in a crowd and be moved, you can't quantify wonder, inspiration or joy. That's what we've lost.
>
> We talk about "funding" as if it's a favour. It's not. It's investment in imagination, in shared experience and in our national story. We invest in trains, hospitals, and clean water because we know they're essential. Art is essential too.
>
> The budget later this month could show whether the government understands that, or not. Sector leaders are calling for a new national arts recovery plan. Not charity but public investment on the same footing as sport or science. Even a small commitment would send a signal that culture matters, that it's part of how we rebuild our economy and communities.
>
> That argument appears to have been lost long ago with Whitehall. But not, it seems, in Durham. People there understood. They came, year after year, in the rain and the cold, to stand together in the light, unified by art. Now the lights are out and what are they left with? Flags and banners?
>
> And unless something changes, Lumiere won't be the last to go dark. (Marriage 2025)

Durham Lumiere Festival is a case of Ricoeurian hospitality. Through art, it invites people to its home and brings differences together while not flattening them into homogeneity. The suspension of the Festival, as with the logic of suspension of

languages and translation programmes in universities and beyond, is a step further into believing in computability of values, knowledge, and aesthetics – into instrumentalisation, aculturalisation, nonsubjectivisation. Translation has never been so crucial an act here, as translation keeps the light of the festival shining. Metaphorically or not, it was translation that allowed Durham to be the place where, in the words of Marriage (ibid.), "the streets are filled, not with division or anger, but with light, laughter and quiet awe. People stand side by side, strangers together, looking up." Translation studies, finding linguistic and semiotic hospitality as its ethical core, thus goes beyond case studies of linguistic transfer or human-machine interaction, but instead becomes a potential cure for the 'space of no culture'. Such hospitality is powerful because, as Derrida and Dufourmantelle (2000) argue, "[i]t is through unconditional hospitality and genuine openness to others that violence and the tendency of the state towards destructive autoimmunity can be avoided." It can only be with translation, understood as a hermeneutic manoeuvre, that one opens to strangers unconditionally, welcoming them home – and, simultaneously, dwelling in their homes without hostility. While Joachim Renn (2006: 11, translated by and cited in Tyulenev 2012: 86) believes that translation is the answer to the question of "[h]ow the integration of modern society is possible despite all the differences and differentiations which mark social existence today?", I believe translation similarly provides a way out of a society where all "differences and differentiations" are flattened as calculable figures.

3.2 Translating Selves: Self-knowledge as Experiential Translation

While the hospitality of translating others preserves the light in the public sphere, the revival of the humanities must also address the internal darkness of the individual, namely, the alienation that turns human beings into social nonsubjects. It is, no doubt, important to know yourself. Nailing the term "emotional self-knowledge", Matt Stichter and Ellen Fridland (2025: 56), with reference to clinical empirical data, report

that "bodily and emotional self-knowledge is so strongly associated with good mental health and well-being […], for example, in aiding emotion regulation, uncovering goals that aren't transparent to us, having a better understanding of our cares and concerns such that we can set more appropriate goals, and so on. However, […] emotional self-knowledge can be difficult to acquire." Obtaining self-knowledge is, arguably, a translational process, as it requires "connections between bodily states, emotional states, and our goals+ with an account of emotions as embodied appraisals" (ibid.). As we will see below, this embodied appraisal is translational, especially understood from the point of view of experiential translation (Campell and Vidal 2024; Vidal and Campell 2025; Vidal Claramonte 2025).

The embodiment of translation has been studied especially in the subfield of cognitive translation and interpreting studies (CTIS) as biological signals that are triggered when one translates or interprets. However, more fundamental than that, translation is inherently a material and bodily process. Douglas Robinson (1991: 6) argues that "to transcendentalize language […] was to dehumanize it", instead, we need to come to realise the language within "the realm in which we actually *use* it – speak it, hear it, understand it – and thus not only to place it effectively beyond our reach but to turn it into a transcendental stick to beat us with." To translate, therefore, requires us "to situate meaning in feeling, […] to bring language back down to earth, into the realm of human subjectivity" (ibid., italics original). To a considerable extent, Robinson's argument speaks directly to social nonsubjectivism, where dehumanisation happens not only in theorising language but pervasively within current society. In a sense, to translate is to live-as-human-beings, to come to be aware of one's subjectivity through bodily connections with the material world: to translate is to life-write. As Natalie Goldberg (2010: 30) poetically argues: "The ability to put something down – to tell how you feel about an old husband, an old shoe, or the memory of a cheese sandwich on a gray morning in Miami – that moment you can finally align how you feel inside with the

words you write; at that moment you are free because you are not fighting those things inside. You have accepted them, become one with them." The moment when you translate, you seek your emotional self-knowledge.

Translating self, therefore, always concerns managing the bodily connection between the self and the world: "translationality is that aspect of material culture that experientially connects us to other people, places, times, and sensations," Piotr Blumczynski (2024: 192) argues, and because one lives in such a connection in their distinct ways, "[t]his multi-sensory translationality is by definition experiential; as such, it will always be tied to someone's – but not everyone's – experience" (ibid.: 193). In other words, one's self-knowledge is not, and certainly cannot be, flattened into monoculturalism, nor could it be calculated, sold or bought, exchanged for money.

4. Conclusion: *New Voices in Translation Studies* as a Space Allowing Hermeneutic Capacity

The death-wave of universities, especially the humanities programmes (Linghu 2026) and the suspension of cultural landmarks like Durham Lumiere are not merely financial setbacks; they are symptoms of a society suffering from Derridean autoimmunity, a system destroying its own hermeneutic capacity and empathy in the pursuit of calculable efficiency. When we prioritise exchange-value over the use-value of human understanding, we risk instrumentalising our cultural capitals, leading to us inhabit a world that is technologically advanced but hermeneutically bankrupt.

There are many new voices in this journal and they all demonstrate that the decline of the institution does not mean the end of the discipline. These voices address critical

issues that make us human. Since I joined the editorial team, I have witnessed how young scholars care about the vulnerable (for example, Kadi 2025), human creativity (Samani, Badiozaman, and Bagheripour 2024), alternative historical narratives (Parham and Rassouli 2025), younger generations (Liu 2024), the ways knowledge is passed on (Bisiada and Bisiada 2025), literature (Daurenbekova et al. 2025), and, of course, many other themes that are impossible to make an exhaustive list of. If anything, the current crisis reveals that translation – understood as both semioethics and life-writing – is more essential than ever. We do not translate simply to facilitate global trade or to train more efficient algorithms; we translate to remain subjects in a world that seeks to turn us into nonsubjects. In the previous issue of *New Voices in Translation Studies*, early career scholar Aoileann Lyons (2025) calls for "more humanities education in translation training". Lyons identifies that the move to humanities – as against computation, I would argue – lies in "translating with all five senses" and, importantly, "notic[ing] things": "Empathy, intuition and the science of imagining difference are not automatic processes: they are skills that must be cultivated and trained, and the humanities is a good school" (84). As an editor of this journal, I totally agree with Lyons. I look forward to more different and new voices to be heard by somatic and other modes of translation through *New Voices in Translation Studies*.

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