On translation and its history in the social sciences and humanities

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Social sciences. Humanities. Translation. History. Micro case study.

This article explores the role of translation within the social sciences and humanities (SSH), as well as some theoretical and methodological challenges of historicizing SSH translation. Moving beyond traditional literary-focused translation studies, we argue that disciplinary fields and their categories are not essentialist but culturally and temporally contingent epistemic constructs. Consequently, providing a rigid definition of SSH translation is both problematic and, perhaps, unnecessary. Through a series of what we call micro case studies, we posit that the study of translation within the SSH can be understood at least in three distinct ways: as a heuristic lens, as a documented practice, and as an internal (trans)disciplinary issue. We conclude that translation within the SSH is better approached as a flexible, unstable and open-ended historical phenomenon, and we advocate for an entangled perspective to historicize it.

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As two translation historians and non-native English speakers, we are exploring the role, function, and position of translation in what has been called "knowledge transfer" within the social sciences and humanities (SSH). Rather than delineating our field of inquiry by listing which disciplines fall into the former and which into the latter – as almost every author in this issue does – we begin by defining our positionality. Hailing from vastly different intellectual geographies – from the Slovak tradition of translation studies to the comparative and historical corridors of Latin America – we inherently approach this topic from two distinct worlds of thought. Moreover, writing about translation in a non-native language for an international audience inherently presupposes an act of self-translation. It requires reshaping ideas, modes of articulation, argumentative structures, and tone to meet the expectations of an international academic journal. Thus, the very act of writing about translation requires translation.

This dynamic becomes even more complex outside the traditional purview of translation studies, a discipline rooted primarily in literary studies, spearheaded by literary scholars, and historically focused on literary texts. Although major theories of non-literary translation have significantly influenced the field (with Skopos theory being the most notable example; cf. Pym 2014) and various non-literary translation activities have been explored, translation specifically within the SSH lacks systematic investigation. Moreover, unlike literature – a common specialization among translation scholars – disciplines such as philosophy, historiography, or sociology require a certain amount of specialized domain knowledge to fully comprehend the specifics and historicity of their discourses. Therefore, as translation scholars tackling these areas, we risk having to translate ourselves discussing translation in fields we do not fully fathom. Interdisciplinarity is, indeed, a form of epistemic translation. Consciously or unconsciously, we are forced to "translate" familiar concepts into these less charted territories, and vice versa.

This study is structured as a mosaic of micro case studies and methodological reflections, interconnected rhizomatically and discursively rather than vertically or hierarchically. It is a conscious assemblage of echoes, fragments, discrepancies, and common grounds, built on the premise that these very fragments of research do not merely represent gaps in a historical record, but can actually help generate useful theoretical arguments. Its explanatory logic relies on the principle of *extrema tanguntur* – the idea that extremes meet – aiming to illustrate just how intricate and entangled the proverbial can of worms becomes when discussing translation within the SSH.

DEFINITIONAL SPACES RUNNING TOO WIDE

This epistemological precarity – the discomfort of operating outside our disciplinary specialization and the resulting difficulty in clearly identifying our object of study – is directly reflected in the discursive strategies translation scholars employ when attempting to define SSH translation. Because we often rely on familiar paradigms to map these uncharted territories, historical definitions of this field have struggled with precision.

A very telling case is how this area of translation has been defined in Slovakia throughout the years. Although the so-called foundational works of Slovak translation studies do not overlook the issue of translating texts from the SSH, definitions of this type of translation remain limited to basic questions stemming from the period's understanding of the specificity of scientific discourse. This discourse was determined primarily by aspirations toward scientism and terminological precision and equivalence (Ilek 1977), a Marxist understanding of the SSH (Popovič 1978), or idiosyncratic attempts at definition through proprietary, largely hermetic conceptual-methodological systems (Miko 1977). It can be argued that while earlier theorists identify the fundamental problem areas related to non-literary translation, they merely skim the surface of these phenomena and generalize where greater precision is needed. This is due to a lack of empirical data regarding the corpus composition of this text type and actual translation practice (a deficit they themselves acknowledge), as well as a historically conditioned understanding of science that was strongly – if not strictly programmatically – influenced by Marxism. Within these outlined contours, their attempt to ground the theoretical modeling of specialized translation issues in the theory of literary translation or the theory of literary translation communication (Popovič 1983) can be understood as a historical necessity.

While it cannot be said that Slovak translation studies in the subsequent period ignored questions related to the translation of specialized or so-called social science texts (cf. the bibliography by Veronika Čejková in Vajdová 2013, and among larger monothematic works, e.g., Truhlářová 2018), these efforts remained entirely fragmentary. Further systematic attempts to grasp this issue more integrally only emerged after 2019. In December of that year, the seminar "Translation of social science texts" took place at the Institute of World Literature of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, after which a research team began to form, alongside a comprehensive methodological-theoretical base initiated by Katarína Bednárová. The result of this renewed interest in the systematic understanding of the translation of so-called socio-humanistic texts (Bednárová 2024) is the *Slovník prekladateliek a prekladateľov: vedy o človeku a kultúre (*Dictionary of Slovak translators in the humanities and social sciences; Bednárová, Kusá, Rybárová 2024). The initial outcome of this renewed interest, the anthology *Preklad vo vedách o človeku a dialóg kultúr* (Translation in the human sciences and the dialogue of cultures, Kusá and Rondziková 2020), already signaled how problematic the inherited umbrella term "translation of social science texts" – dating back to the foundational period of Slovak translation studies (1978) – proved to be during subsequent reflections and discussions. For this reason as well, the editors of the anthology de facto refrained from providing a precise definition of this quasi-concept, offering instead only "working coordinates" (9). From a typological perspective, they broadly describe this type of translation as a subgenre of specialized translation, the subject of which can be a literary text, or within which expressive and literary linguistic devices may be variously represented and utilized. From a content perspective, in their view, "texts related to the humanities and/or social sciences"[1] fall within the scope of the term translation of social science texts (9). From both a thematic and stylistic standpoint, they note that social science texts can thus be viewed

as borderline types of texts, since paradigms of various disciplines and different styles can intertwine within them. Last but not least, the concept of translating social science texts encompasses historically variable text types that reflect changes in the position and status of the sciences within them. This case of effectively giving up a rigid definition using inherited paradigms clearly demonstrates that if old categorizations fall apart, new ones cannot simply be built upon their ruins.

A similar definitional and conceptual problem is faced by translation historians working within the domain of philosophical thought. Crucially, until quite recently, "the history of philosophy and the history of translation have remained independent theoretical endeavours" (Castro 2014, 81–83). This does not mean, of course, that scholars have not discussed the translation of philosophical texts, but rather that historiography of philosophy has not systematically interrogated the translated status of many texts that constitute the "philosophical flatlands" for canon formation and for the emergence of hegemonic historiographical narratives (Castro 2014). This can become a major epistemological and methodological shortcoming when historians of both translation and philosophy have to deal, for example, with postcolonial philosophical traditions that are frequently (as their own practitioners admit) unoriginal or imitative by nature.

It is generally accepted that the urge to philosophize is universal; that there is a natural, essentially human need to make sense of the world and of ourselves by asking fundamental, ontological questions. It is also generally accepted that the answers to these questions – as well as the ways in which they are expressed and conceptualized through models, systems, myths, etc. – vary greatly across space and time, since philosophies are linguistically and culturally bound. As scholarship has consistently shown, this is but one of the many challenges that the translation of philosophy must address.[2]

However, this clash outlined between the universal and the particular (or culturally bound) lies at the very core of the problematic definition – and perhaps of the mere existence – of a distinct Hispanic American philosophical thought. Following the end of four centuries of colonial rule, Latin American intellectuals, seeking to define their cultural and political identity, began to pose a series of daunting questions: Is there, or can there be, a Hispanic American philosophy? If a particular Hispanic American thought exists, how can it be characterized? What, precisely, makes a philosophy "Hispanic American"[3]? Furthermore, what is it that binds any philosophy to its specific circumstances? Is it the topics, the questions, the system, the methods? The answers to these questions were, of course, diverse and complex, and it is beyond the scope of this paper and the expertise of the authors to account for them in detail. What interests us now regarding this fundamental Latin American philosophical debate is that it clearly reveals the sometimes unescapable relationship between the definition and understanding of philosophy (its scope, its nature, its uses, etc.) and cultural identity and socio-historical and political conditions (Ruiz Sotelo 2020; Arpini 2024; Porciello 2025).

It was famously argued in that dispute that an original Hispanic American philosophy does not exist since it traditionally applied European philosophical systems

and models, and hence failed to concern itself with the needs and nature of American peoples – a philosophy of domination. It was also stated that an authentic Hispanic American philosophical thought would only be achieved once the structural economic and political dependence of the continent on Western hegemonic powers was definitively broken. According to this view, then, as long as such structural dependence remained, no authentic philosophical thought could ever be produced in "Nuestra America" (Salazar Bondi 1968). Simultaneously, however, another complementary perspective emerged: for a Latin American philosophy to be truly authentic, it must incorporate an awareness of this very dependence and of its peripheral condition and must remain conscious of its epistemological and structural constraints. An authentic Latin American philosophy should be produced from within the situation of dependence and oppression, evolving – as in the work of Enrique Dussel – into a "philosophy of liberation" (1975, 1984).

This fundamental philosophical Latin American postcolonial debate tells us, among other things, that unoriginality, (in)authenticity and imitation – which entail forms of reception, appropriation, and translation – can become the defining features of a philosophical tradition, as long as it is conceived of as a situated *praxis*, a form of criticism rooted in the structures and concepts it intends to question and dismantle. The theoretical and methodological call to "merge the narratives" of translation and philosophical historiography might be "the best way to tell a story that is neither a translation history nor a history of philosophy, but a story of philosophy in the making" (Castro 2014, 92; 2018).

HISTORICIZING SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES TRANSLATION

Definitions of SSH translation – or even of ostensibly clearer subsets like the translation of philosophy – span a vast spectrum. One might argue that instead of fixating on *what* is being translated (which disciplines fall into this purview, which genres are included, or how much definitional leeway exists), the focus should shift to *how* the translating is done. Or, in the context of methodological reflections such as ours, how translation must be conceptualized to fit the myriad contexts and applications within the SSH. As the aforementioned and following cases illustrate, translation within the SSH can be understood (at least) in three distinct ways:

- As a **lens** applied by scholars to understand the histories of various SSH disciplines. These scholars need not be translation scholars themselves; in fact, it is an even greater testament to the significance of translation when it is "discovered" by figures like Dimitri Gutas (1998). This strand is essentially historiographical in nature, as it addresses how disciplines emerge by way of translation, and how their fields and intellectual allegiances are forged. When translation operates as a lens, it is the primary key used to unlock historical understanding.
- As a **documented practice** encompassing linguistic policies, networks of agents, a variety of discursive genres, communication media, and linguistic and translational strategies. Often applied from the standpoint of cultural his-

tory, this approach has been essential to make sense of how ideas, practices, and concepts traveled in space and time, establishing global connections and sometimes unexpected circulations that potentially constitute languages and peoples.

- As an **internal disciplinary or transdisciplinary issue**, where scholars engage in theoretical discussions about translation to address concerns specific to their own field's identity or specificity. Essentially, this reflects how experts in different disciplines, such as sociologists like Pierre Bourdieu (see Bielsa 2024), historians (see Woodsworth 2021 for a counterexample), or philosophers, define translation according to their own methodological needs or received ideas. They often use the concept of translation to evaluate the circulation of ideas, but typically do so without fully acknowledging the actual mechanics of the translation process. Philosophers, for instance, frequently discuss translation as a means of addressing internal concerns related to disciplinary identity, the history of philosophy, or even academic life (e.g., Bednárová 2020).

However, even after "opening up" translation itself, the way forward is not always clear. Since translation is a social practice, it must be viewed in light of the agencies and networks involved in its production, operation, and impact. Therefore, our following micro case studies illustrate further potential methodological pitfalls in this regard.

MEDIATING PROFESSIONS, AGENTS, NETWORKS

When researching the translation of SSH texts, the figure of the translator requires explicit scholarly attention. Translators in this domain are rarely mere linguistic conduits; rather, their socio-professional profiles often reveal them to be historically significant actors who actively shape intellectual discourse. As demonstrated by a recent large language model-based (LLM) macro-analytical study of the *Slovník prekladateliek a prekladateľov: vedy o človeku a kultúre* (Bednárová, Kusá, and Rybárová 2024), this specific translation field in Slovakia is deeply shaped by a complex sociology and underlying power structures (Tyšš 2026, forthcoming).[4]

The findings of this analysis revealed that the SSH translation field is heavily influenced by the Matthew Effect (Merton 1968) in the form of academic privilege. Institutional affiliation and accumulated symbolic capital disproportionately amplify a Slovak SSH translator's visibility and their chances of entering the historical record. The field operates on the principles of a "Guild", where entry into historical consciousness is frequently mediated by what the LLM tool itself called translation "dynasties". Within these structures, symbolic capital is either inherited or institutionally assigned, with editorial power serving a crucial gatekeeping function. Translators here do not act merely as performers, but rather as "Curators" – experts who identify valuable intellectual artifacts abroad and prepare them for local display.

Furthermore, the analysis exposed a sharp conceptual dichotomy between "Architects" and "Builders". Academics and institutional elites are predominantly inducted into the dictionary as Architects; their contribution is evaluated based on the de-

sign of foundational conceptual and theoretical structures, even when their overall volume of translated work is low. Conversely, freelance translators and non-academic actors are perceived as Builders, whose inclusion in the canon is legitimized almost exclusively by the massive scale of their output (Tyšš 2026).

These findings confirm that the persona of the translator cannot be bypassed in the study of SSH translations. To ignore their socio-historical profile would mean overlooking the institutional habitus and structural barriers that directly dictate which texts penetrate the target culture and how they are inscribed into its history.

DE-CENTRALIZED PUBLICATION CULTURES

To illustrate further methodological challenges and show the potential of another rather under-researched area in SSH translation history, that of periodical research, we can turn to a micro-case study of *Revue svetovej literatúry* (Review of world literature). Established as the premier Slovak journal dedicated to mediating foreign literature, it operated as a crucial cultural bridge during the Cold War. Examining its output between 1965 and 1970 offers a particularly valuable empirical lens. This specific timeframe represents a highly sensitive and historically significant era in Czechoslovakia, capturing the dramatic transition from the cultural and political liberalization of the 1960s – which culminated in the Prague Spring – to the subsequent onset of "normalization" and renewed ideological censorship.

Against the backdrop of these shifting political paradigms, a quantitative probe into the journal's content dismantles the assumption that it was merely a space for primary artistic texts. Empirical data reveals that the category of "Articles, essays" consistently dominated the journal's output throughout this period, accounting for nearly half of all published entries and peaking at an impressive 50.6% in 1970.[5] Coupled with a massive surge in critical reviews from 1967 onward – which routinely comprised over a third of the content – it becomes clear that the journal profiled itself primarily as an intellectual, critical, and current affairs platform. Conversely, the relative share of primarily literary texts such as poetry and prose saw a steady decline. Consequently, a closer look at the 33 most extensive texts (15 pages or more) in the analyzed corpus from 1965 to 1970 fundamentally disrupts the traditional perception of this periodical as an exclusively belletristic platform, highlighting instead a surprisingly substantial and deliberate investment in socio-humanistic translations. A significant portion of this selection consists of texts with profound socio-humanistic, philosophical, and culturological implications. The fact that the editorial board did not hesitate to sacrifice valuable and limited magazine space for long-read formats testifies to a programmatic effort to substitute for the absence of a broader discourse in the humanities within the domestic environment. Space was given to key contemporary thinkers – from the Frankfurt School neo-Marxist Theodor W. Adorno (1970) to the French Jesuit and visionary Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1968), the Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski (1969), the analyst of technological and geopolitical trends Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber (1968), and the critic of popular culture Susan Sontag (1969).

The publication history of these translations fully demonstrates the specific nature of the periodical medium – its dynamism and ability to react almost immediately to current global intellectual currents, in stark contrast to the more cumbersome book production. While *Revue svetovej literatúry* published the radical essays of Susan Sontag, the writings of James Baldwin (1966), or the philosophical diary of Witold Gombrowicz (1970) at the time of their greatest global acclaim, the book reception of these works in the Czechoslovak environment was delayed for decades. The first Slovak book translation of Baldwin was not published until 1978, the works of Sontag and Gombrowicz had to wait for official publication until the 1990s after the fall of the regime, and Servan-Schreiber's highly influential *The American Challenge*, for example, was never published in book form. Periodicals thus functioned in this era as the fastest (and for many authors the only) transfer of intellectual innovations for a long time.

The urgency and timeliness of periodical production also played a strategic role in the socio-political context of the late 1960s. In the power vacuum at the turn of the decade – when preventive censorship had already fallen, but the repressive normalization apparatus had not yet managed to fully institutionalize its control mechanisms – *Revue svetovej literatúry* managed to introduce texts with exceptionally strong subversive potential. It is significant that in 1969, the essay "Kňaz a šašo" ("Kapłan i błazen", 1959; Eng. trans. "The Priest and the Jester", 1962) by Leszek Kołakowski was published, just a year after he was expelled from his native Poland for critiquing Marxist philosophy. Similarly, the penetration of texts by Teilhard de Chardin, whose unorthodox works later circulated in Slovakia exclusively in samizdat and exile publishing houses (or in Czech translation within later dissident circles), or the introduction of the critical theory of Western Marxism (Adorno), prove that extensive magazine spaces did not serve merely for literary updates. They became a temporary, power-tolerated asylum for the inconvenient yet formative ideas of contemporary Europe.

ENTANGLEMENTS AND RELATIONALITY

Over the last few decades, relationality has emerged as a central tenet in translation studies, serving as both an epistemological framework and a methodological toolkit. It has been interpreted through a diverse array of approaches – ranging from systemic theories to cultural sociology, from translation norms to network theory, from social network analysis to translator agency. This centrality of relationality has been recently acknowledged and consolidated in a special issue of the journal *The Translator* (Cantó-Milà et al. 2025), which presents relationism as a "new paradigm". In this view, "relations generate social meanings, identities, possibilities for action, imaginaries, structures, and materialities" (5): translation itself is thus best understood as an embedded social practice and a process of distributed agency.

While this recent issue focuses primarily on applying relational sociology to translation studies research, its theoretical underpinnings align somewhat closely with another productive framework recently adopted by translation history scholars working with SSH texts, in this case of a political and ideological nature: the *his-*

toire croisée (which we translate in English as "entangled history") toolbox. Another recent special issue published in the journal *History of European Ideas* (Mannucci, Mucignat, and Perovic 2025) as a corollary to the large-scale project "Radical Translations: The Transfer of Revolutionary Culture Between Britain, France, and Italy (1789–1815)", posits that translation offers a unique vantage point for assessing how transnationalism functions empirically as a historical practice, since translation was a form of revolutionary communication that connected and "crossed all sorts of national, political and social divides" (1238). To account for the translation network emerging from their archival and archaeological research, and to move beyond the "diffusionist model" of circulation of ideas that still prevail in many historiographical accounts on that period, the editors rely expressly on the entangled history framework as a way to offer a multi-scalar perspective – across space, time, and various media and social actors – on how translation encompassed transnational encounters "from below". Interestingly, according to the editors this perspective offers a "geopolitically scoped" counter-narrative to the centrality of nation-states and empires in the spread of all kinds of cultural products, practices, actors, and ideas.

The choice to make use of the entangled history toolbox, however, is not justified solely by the complex, multi-layered materiality of translation, which naturally calls for a multi-scalar approach connecting the global to the local. One may indeed wonder if translation history scholars have not been making precisely this point for quite some time now, using different and not necessarily relational, connected or entangled theoretical frameworks. What is, by contrast, a distinctive feature of the *histoire croisée* toolbox is its emphasis on reflexivity. As the editors underline, "every researcher is called upon to explain and justify how the choice of one set of entanglements might preclude others. This requires a reflection not just on what is being entangled but also the ways in which our own conceptual frameworks constitute our objects of study" (1242).

We believe that this last point, which can seem speculative or vague if not properly contextualized, is of great consequence for an inherently interdisciplinary field such as the one we are dealing with. Interdisciplinarity can be, for contemporary research, both a beacon and an enigma. As curators of the present issue, we made a point – when possible and when we saw fit – to address out-of-field reviewers (i.e., not scholars of translation studies) to assess some of the papers presented. We can safely say that, on occasions, when the issue of reflexivity and researcher's positionality is not properly addressed or conveyed, misunderstandings can arise. When disciplinary traditions are very strong, academically powerful and deeply geographically and linguistically rooted, it is not always easy to work "from the outside" and establish forms of methodologically and epistemologically entangled dialogues.

Furthermore, in addition to its inherent interdisciplinarity, SSH translation history should rely on a flexible, open-ended set of definitions regarding what translation is and how it functions historically (which is not how translation is usually viewed by out-of-field experts); it can question what defines or delimits a disciplinary field; it problematizes the depth of knowledge required to cross disciplinary boundaries, and how "out-of-field" concepts are inter-epistemically (and linguistically!) translated

to accommodate specific conceptual and methodological needs. The "entangled history" toolbox calls precisely for the integration of these (and other) questions and concerns into the historical narrative, in order to produce a coherent and self-aware interpretation of the findings and results. As its theorists state, the inquiry always shapes the object, and the characteristics of the object necessarily influence the parameters of the inquiry (Werner and Zimmermann 2003); it could be in the interest of the researcher and of his or her investigation to make room, if necessary, for this dialectic.

CONCLUSION

The inception of the present authors' collaboration might sound like the setup to a joke: an Argentinian and a Slovak walk into a conference. While co-editing this issue and tackling the various methodological and conceptual challenges presented by the articles, we began – as historians often do – tossing cases and examples at one another to prove our points. Our disparate intellectual histories, educational paths, and cultural and linguistic backgrounds provided plenty of extreme differences, frequently revealing gaping holes in each other's knowledge; nevertheless, strong commonalities also emerged, fostering productive dialogue and generating key new insights for our research. The disparate fragments we shared became the very foundation of our arguments. Serving also as an introduction to this special issue, the present study does not strive to offer a definitive, closed conclusion to the question of SSH translation. Instead, it deliberately presents a series of fragmented reflections – not as a scattered assortment of unrelated thoughts, but as a purposeful, open-ended mosaic. This special issue is partly the realization and result of dialogue, both among us and with the authors who participated.

Instead of rigidly defining what the humanities and social sciences *should* be and which disciplines that definition *should* encompass – merely so that we translation historians can finally write our histories about translation's significance within them – we propose applying translation in all its multilayered phenomenology, considering its openness, contingency, distributed agency, and, indeed, its vagueness. This approach entails viewing translation simultaneously as a lens for understanding SSH histories, as a documented practice potentially shaping those histories, and as an (albeit reductively understood) issue in the debates in the various SSH disciplines, constantly adapting to the positionality, objectives, and agendas of the person doing the actual thinking (about translation).

NOTES

[1] Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the present authors.

[2] This point has been made definitely by Barbara Cassin in the monumental *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: dictionnaire des intraduisibles* (2004), then *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon* (2014).

[3] We use the term "Hispanic American" to make reference to a specific geographically and linguistically bound philosophical thought because many authors who participated in this debate do so, most notably Salazar Bondi (1968, 13–14).

[4] To uncover these hidden patterns of canonization, the research employed the AI model NotebookLM. The choice of this specific tool was deliberate. Unlike standard large language models, which are prone to "hallucinations" when analyzing historical data, NotebookLM operates on the principle of strict grounding in the uploaded source documents. Using manually redacted entries containing only data pertaining to the translators' biographies and professional trajectories together with a instruction file explaining necessary context and used abbreviations, NotebookLM used in this way made it possible to transform this semi-structured "flat" data into a dynamic database. Through the method of algorithmic "scaled close reading", the model successfully identified the implicit profiling rules that determine who warrants inclusion in the canon.

[5] This specific categorization into "Articles, essays" was established retrospectively by bibliographer Peter Kerlik (2005), whose comprehensive bibliography of the journal served as the primary dataset for our distant reading analysis. It is worth noting that these categories represent the bibliographer's subsequent systematization rather than the original editorial rubrics of the journal.

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