# Translating the humanities and social sciences: Increased visibility, shifting boundaries

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Status of translation. Teaching humanities and social sciences translation. Research on humanities and social sciences translation. Shifting boundaries between translation genres. Autoethnography.

This article examines the characteristics and challenges of translating the humanities and social sciences. It reviews developments in teaching and research in social science and humanities translation, underlining various approaches or methodologies that can shed light on this area. The article also proposes an autoethnographic analysis of the author's practice as a translator, illustrating the research involved in producing a precise and readable target text. It goes on to offer some reflections on shifting boundaries between genres of translation.

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Once portrayed as a subsidiary art, translation has gained credibility with the emergence of the discipline of translation studies. An enhanced body of knowledge, including the history of translation, has increasingly shone the spotlight on translators. And yet, not all forms of translation have received equal attention, with more focus on works of literature or else sacred texts. Short shrift has often been given to work in the humanities and social sciences, whose translators and even authors have in many cases remained anonymous.

This article reviews developments in teaching and research in social science and humanities translation and sets out some of the approaches or methodologies that can shed light on this area. In addition, I draw on my own practice, offering an autoethnographic account that aims to illustrate the complexities of translation and delve into the shifting boundaries between genres of translation.

## OUT OF THE SHADOWS

The secondary status of translation has long been conveyed in metaphorical language, often emanating from the pens of translators themselves or, more significantly, of well-known writers who were also translators. In the dedication to his 1697 translation of Virgil's *Aeneid*, John Dryden, for one, depicts translators as "slaves" who "labour in another man's plantation" and as "drudges" who are merely doing their "duty" (quoted in Lefevere 1992, 24). This kind of rhetoric preceded Dryden and continues to this day. Discourse on translation has been embroidered with a host of metaphors, evoking translators who merely follow in the *footsteps* of so-called original writers.

The contemporary American author Paul Auster, who worked as a translator as a young man and maintained an interest in translation throughout his life, called translators the "shadow heroes of literature" (2007). Not unlike Dryden, however, he puts these words in the mouth of his fictional translator: "I felt like someone who had been sentenced to a term of hard labor on a chain gang" (1989, 90).[1]

The field of translation studies has grown exponentially since the mid-20th century, as have undergraduate training programs and teaching at the master's and doctoral levels. With greater awareness of the important role that translation has played in the circulation of ideas, the status of translation has improved. Translation is now regarded as a fundamental driver of cultural evolution. At the same time, however, innovations in machine translation, and now artificial intelligence (AI), have had an adverse effect, relegating translation – in the minds of the wider public – to a merely mechanical operation which can be performed by something as simple and omnipresent as a mobile phone.[2]

In short, translation has been and continues to be underappreciated despite the advances to which we have referred. Translation scholars have generally focused on literature and sacred texts, ignoring the breadth and complexity of the social sciences and humanities. Translators, consequently, tend to remain in the shadows – sometimes to an even greater degree if they are engaged in the translation of the humanities and social sciences.

There are concrete indications, on the other hand, that the tide has turned among academics, with a growing interest in this specific field of translation. One example

is a research report published under the direction of Gisèle Sapiro (2014). Another is a special edition of the Canadian translation journal *TTR*, co-edited by René Lemieux and Patricia Godbout in 2024. Further examples can be found in this issue of *World Literature Studies*, which is based on the papers presented at a conference in Bratislava in May 2025. With a variety of voices from Eastern, Central, and Western Europe, as well as North America, with insights into multiple languages including some Indigenous ones, the conference initiated a timely and wide-ranging discussion of the past, present and future of translating social sciences and humanities, which will ultimately lead to further reflection and new publications.

## THE QUESTION OF VISIBILITY: NAMING THE TRANSLATOR

Some translators have remained invisible quite simply because they are not named. It may seem mundane to quibble about whether translators are mentioned and, if so, where their name appears, but these questions, arguably, have symbolic implications.

The following observation by writer and book reviewer Leah Rachel von Essen raises the problem of the translator's invisibility. Although it pertains to translated literature, it is also relevant for our purposes: "Translated literature is on the rise, which is wonderful – but we have to make sure we are honoring the translators who work on each book. Too often, translators are considered 'invisible' contributors to the book, hidden on title pages or even in copyright sections" (2021, n.p.).

The picture is somewhat brighter in Canada, which has been described as a "paradise" and a "promised land" for translators (Delisle 1998, 360–361). Literary translators, who launched the Literary Translators' Association of Canada as early as 1975, have worked tirelessly to achieve recognition, through fair contracts and access to copyright, among other accomplishments. As a result of their advocacy, the translator's name tends to appear on the cover of a translated work of literature. In the humanities and social sciences, on the other hand, the situation is murkier.

One recent example is a book titled *Doing Democracy in "Third Places"*: *Youth Citizenship Education*, published by a major – and bilingual – academic publisher, the University of Ottawa Press (2025). The translation from French to English is by Carmen Ruschiensky, who is not only a certified translator but also holds a doctorate in translation studies. The names of the two co-authors, along with a collaborator, appear on the cover of the book; on its website, the publisher lists the co-authors, several contributors, and even an illustrator, but not the translator – whose name is provided only inside the book (Gaudet and Caron 2025).

To cite a recent setback in our alleged "paradise", the Canada Council for the Arts, which has funded literary (book) translations since 1972, made a controversial decision in 2018 to stop funding the translation of nonfiction. Translation grants were henceforth reserved for texts that were strictly "literary". Ironically, the Canada Council also administers Canada's most prestigious literary awards, named for the Governor General (and referred to as the "GGs"), in which there are several categories in both English and French: fiction, nonfiction, poetry, children's literature, and drama, as well as translation into both languages. Within the category of trans-

lation, all genres are considered, including nonfiction, for which there are no longer Canada Council grants.[3]

## SOCIAL SCIENCE AND HUMANITIES TRANSLATION: TEACHING AND RESEARCH

It is clear, nonetheless, that progress is being made with respect to humanities and social science translation. This manifests itself in different ways. First, some translation schools – although not all of them – include humanities and social sciences translation in their curriculum.

At Princeton University, the late professor David M. Bellos gave a course called "Thinking Translation" that was required in the undergraduate Certificate in Translation and Intercultural Communication. The description states:

> Translation is at the heart of the humanities, and it arises in every discipline in the social sciences and beyond, but it is not easy to say what it is. This course looks at the role of translation in the past and in the world of today [...]. It aims to help students grasp the basic intellectual and philosophical problems raised by the transfer of meanings from one language to another (including in machine translation) and to acquaint them with the functions, structures and effects of translation in intercultural communication. (Princeton University 2025)

This overview encourages critical thinking about the impact of translation and sets the stage for hands-on translation.

To give another example, students in Concordia University's master's in translation studies (*Traductologie*) are offered a choice of practical seminars from literary to scientific and technical translation. Among the options is a seminar in translating social sciences and humanities, which I taught in 2012 and 2013. Heartened by the fact that a distinct course on this topic existed, I set out to devise a pedagogy specific to the field. I assigned practical assignments drawn from different disciplines; in some instances, I invited the author of the original text to discuss the translation process with the students. Students were also required to analyze the choices they had made in their translations. It was important, therefore, to provide theoretical material that would give them the tools to do so. This proved to be more difficult.

By this time, a vast amount of scholarly material had been generated in translation studies. Yet many of the giants of the field had taken a literary approach, building on examples from literature rather than the human and social sciences. George Steiner's *After Babel* (1975) opens with a discussion of writers like Shakespeare, Jane Austen, and Dante, Susan Bassnett's *Translation Studies* (1980) makes use of examples such as the Old English poem "The Seafarer", and Gideon Toury's descriptive translation studies is grounded in polysystem theory, which emphasizes the interplay of cultural and literary elements. Antoine Berman examines the Romantic literary movement in Germany in *L'épreuve de l'étranger: Culture et traduction dans l'Allemagne romantique: Herder, Goethe, Schlegel, Novalis, Humboldt, Schleiermacher, Hölderlin* (1984; Eng. trans. *The Trial of the Foreign: Culture and Translation in Romantic Germany*, 1992), although he does include thinkers such as Humboldt and Schleiermacher among the literary figures he discusses. When works of literature are

not the focus, sacred texts are, such as the Christian Bible in Eugene Nida's work, or the Hebrew Bible in the case of Henri Meschonnic.

It was not easy, therefore, to find suitable background reading for my students. In my bibliography, which I gave them at the time, I included a well-known essay by Immanuel Wallerstein (1981), which lays out what the author calls some "ground rules" (89) and, as he says, "reiterates some homespun truths" (97). I also used a second text, by Michael Henry Heim and Andrzej W. Tymowski (2006), who offer what they call a set of "guidelines" resulting from the Social Science Translation Project, which had involved specialized translators, university social scientists, editors, and journalists. Some helpful appendices are included, one of which reprises a fundamental question raised by Wallerstein: what kind of translator is best suited to this kind of work – a well-trained and seasoned translator, or else a subject-matter expert? Heim and Tymowski cite Wallerstein, who 25 years earlier had advocated

> the creation of a body of translators specialized in the social sciences and trained in both translation techniques and social science. […] [These translators] do not now exist. Most translation in the social sciences is done either by social scientists who are not very good as translators, or by translators with a primary background in literature rather than in social science. The results are by and large appalling… (Wallerstein 1981, 89; quoted in Heim and Tymowski 2006, 26)

I would argue that the group of specialists envisioned by Wallerstein still does not exist. The best we can do is train translators to be well-read generalists with the ability to do the specific research required to translate accurately.

In my course, students were also introduced to the question of retranslation, which has both practical and theoretical implications, using H. M. Parshley's now-notorious translation of Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949; Eng. trans. *The Second Sex*, 1953) as a case study. In addition to Parshley's "Translator's Preface", students read the paratexts associated with Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier's revised version published more than a half century later: Judith Thurman's introduction and Borde and Malovany-Chevallier's "Translators' Note" (Beauvoir 2009). The translation of this seminal work has been the subject of numerous studies, which have emphasized the limitations of the original translation, its grievous errors at the hand of a man unfamiliar with philosophy – in particular, existentialism and nascent feminism – who was compelled by the publisher to bowdlerize the original text. While the new translators, on the other hand, restored the expurgated passages and translated more accurately, they are said to have sacrificed readability in favor of unidiomatic literalism. This interesting and complex case can shed light on the involvement of multiple actors in the translation process, and the requirement of translators to yield to the demands of other actors such as editors and publishers.

## APPROACHES TO INVESTIGATING HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES TRANSLATION

The case study approach is just one of the ways of examining translation in the humanities and social sciences. With time, there has been a proliferation of studies on this subject. The following is a selection of approaches that are worth considering.

One useful perspective has been to address the transfer of important concepts, or in some cases the barriers to their transfer, as in the work of Barbara Cassin and her collaborators (2004). The humanities and social sciences are built on concepts that often defy translation, and scholars have written about their untranslatability, non-translation, and the absence of "universals".

Another approach entails focusing on the translator. There has been a growing emphasis on the person of the translator in translation studies, previously missing from a field largely dominated by linguistic perspectives and text-based approaches – so much so that Andrew Chesterman (2009) saw fit to baptize the new subdiscipline "translator studies". From *Translators Through History* (Delisle and Woodsworth [1995] 2012) and Jean Delisle's collections *Portraits de traducteurs* (Portraits of [male] translators, 1999) and *Portraits de traductrices* (Portraits of [female] translators, 2002), up to the more recent collection edited by Klaus Kaindl, Waltraud Kolb, and Daniela Schlager, specifically titled *Literary Translator Studies*, the person of the translator has been placed at the "centre of scholarly investigation" (Kaindl 2021, 9).

In translator studies, investigators have typically stressed translators of literature, such as Constance Garnett, the translator of over 70 volumes of Russian literature. But this path can also help us understand the translation of works in the humanities and social sciences. In some cases, literary translators have also contributed to social sciences translation. One of the portraits in Delisle's anthology of women translators (2002), for example, is of Eleanor Marx, who is known for her translation of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, but has also been recognized for her rendition of her father's *Das Kapital*.[4]

Harriet Martineau is another figure who made an important contribution to the discipline of sociology through her work as a translator. Known as a social theorist and social activist, she has been recognized for her translations of Auguste Comte, who coined the term *sociologie* and is considered to be the father of sociology. Daniela Schlager, one of the co-editors of the volume on translator studies mentioned above, dedicates a chapter to Martineau in the collection (2021, 199–214).[5]

The translation of important thinkers has also led to the transfer of entire movements of thought, such as the one known as "French Theory", which provides fertile material for investigators.[6] Without translation, French Theory might not have massively influenced new audiences. In this case, translation was instrumental in circulating the French ideas, as well as reframing the school of thought based on its national origin.

## TRANSLATORS' MEMOIRS

When translators comment on their own work, whether in prefaces, notes, or memoirs, they naturally become more visible, giving themselves a space to reflect on their practice, the type of texts they translate, and the choices they have made. These texts can be viewed as a kind of "creative-critical research" as Delphine Grass and Lily Robert-Foley point out. Previously relegated to the margins, "invisible or couched in shadows, speaking only through the voice of another" (2024, 1),

the translator acquires a voice through their memoir, and at the same time sheds light on the process of translation.

Having reviewed some of the ways in which we can deepen our understanding of humanities and social science translation, I would now like to turn briefly to my own experience as a translator. In the spirit of writing a "microhistory" of translation, as advocated by Jeremy Munday (2014),[7] or creating what has been called a translation memoir, I have taken an autoethnographic approach, using personal narrative combined with theoretical frameworks to make sense of my own work.[8]

As in all specialized fields, the various subdisciplines of the humanities and social sciences each makes use of terminology. Experts within each discipline employ a specialized language – labelled "jargon" in some cases – and articulate specific and distinct concepts. This relates to the question touched on earlier, raised by Wallerstein and later signaled by Heim and Tymowski: is it enough to be an experienced translator, or do you have to be a specialist in the material you are translating? I believe that it is possible for teachers to share techniques and tactics with students. With time, trainees will be able to recognize what they do not know and will learn to research the terminology and concepts specific to the field they are working in. I base this conviction on my own work, which led me to tackle specialized areas with which I was unfamiliar at the outset, but which ultimately resulted in translations meeting the dual criteria of accuracy and readability.[9]

In recent years, I have translated two works of nonfiction and two novels. The first major work of nonfiction I translated was Pierre Anctil's *Histoire des Juifs du Québec* (2017; Eng. trans. *History of the Jews in Quebec*, 2021). Next, I took on the translation of Marc-André Éthier and David Lefrançois's *Mondes profanes: Enseignement, fiction et histoire* (2018; Eng. trans. *Bringing History to Life: Teaching Fact and Fiction,* 2025). During the same period (2021–2025), I also translated the Romanian-Canadian Felicia Mihali's novel *Le pays du fromage* (originally published in Romanian as *Ţara brînzei* [Land of cheese], 1999; French trans. 2002; Eng. trans. *A Ramshackle Home*, 2023) and the Lebanese-Canadian Abla Farhoud's novel *Le bonheur a la queue glissante* (1998; Eng. trans. *Happiness Has a Slippery Tail*, 2025).[10] This has given me an understanding of the similarities and differences between the two types of translation.

## TRANSLATING PIERRE ANCTIL, *HISTORY OF THE JEWS IN QUEBEC*

Anctil is an award-winning historian who has also translated poetry, memoirs, and journalistic and archival material from Yiddish to French. Translation has been vital to his work as a researcher and scholar, enabling him to draw on English, French and Yiddish sources. The remarkable confluence of translation and historical scholarship enriched his output as a historian, but it also had a bearing on my own task as a translator. I conducted my research of relevant terminology not simply by consulting print and online reference books like dictionaries and other terminological material, but also by reading sources in English referred to by the author. When in doubt, I prefer to consult an expert, in this case the author. Anctil is not just proficient in English,

but as a translator, he has an understanding of translation problems. We engaged in extensive discussions, which – interestingly – sometimes resulted in the author's realization that the original was unclear or even incorrect. Translators can sometimes be good editors.

Texts in the social sciences and humanities often blend scientific analysis with literary expression. Rhetorical devices, metaphorical language, and stylistic nuances are introduced and shape the reader's interpretation. Inspired by the poetry and colorful memoirs of the Yiddish-speaking population in early 20th-century Montreal, Anctil has perhaps been more inclined than other historians to couch his historical narrative in a literary voice, and to make more frequent use of stylistic flourishes than the average social science and humanities scholar.

It is important to note, though, that rhetorical or literary elements are not simply embellishments; they can in fact be integral to the argumentation in many humanities texts. To support this proposition, we can refer to an earlier study of metaphor, which argues that metaphors are not merely decorative or ornamental, but can also be "theory-constitutive" (Boyd 1979). It is also true that different languages and academic traditions have divergent conventions for blending scientific analysis with literary elements.

I offer a small sample of the translation. In the following excerpt, the author has drawn on the memoirs of the editor of a Montreal daily newspaper published in Yiddish, the lingua franca of the Jewish population of the day. The editor recalls that their offices were overrun by people seeking all kinds of advice and preventing the newspaper staff from getting on with their real work. The effect is theatrical or cinematic in that the reader can visualize the scene and even hear the chatter – the kind of writing, in short, that is more characteristic of literature than a work of social science:

> Sans cesse, les immigrants font irruption dans la salle de rédaction ou dans les bureaux de la direction, pour y réclamer des conseils [...]. Ils [les journalistes] étaient sans cesse distraits dans leur travail par les demandes des uns et des autres ou plongés dans des dilemmes cornéliens touchant la réunion de familles éloignées par la distance ou affectées par la désertion de maris adultères. (Anctil 2017, 112)

> Immigrants continuously burst into the newsroom or the editorial offices, seeking advice [...]. They [the newspaper staff] were continuously distracted from their real work by these kinds of demands, or else drawn into the moral dilemmas of families who wished to be reunited with loved ones in distant lands or of women deserted by adulterous husbands. (Anctil 2021, 89)

When translating from French to English, it has been important to capture the stylistic elements, while bearing in mind that Anglo-American academic writing tends to favor clarity and concision over literary embellishment. Thus, translating the humanities and social sciences requires more than linguistic fluency; it demands sensitivity to the interplay between style and substance. The ideal translation maintains the author's intellectual depth while adapting rhetorical features to suit the expectations of the target audience.

## TRANSLATING MARC-ANDRÉ ÉTHIER AND DAVID LEFRANÇOIS, *BRINGING HISTORY TO LIFE*

A collection of essays written by different people in divergent styles, Éthier and Lefrançois's *Bringing History to Life* had enjoyed some success and had already been reprinted in a second French edition. The book's premise was compelling: popular media such as video games, historical fiction, re-enactments, and graphic novels can be used to teach history, provided that students learn how to distinguish fact from fiction. This pedagogical approach fosters historical thinking, which leads to the development of sound critical thinking about societal issues in general.

Written in French, there were naturally numerous references to material in the French language, which had to be translated into English. But because of the subject matter (American feature films, for example), there were many references to material that was originally in English and had been translated into French for the publication. It was important to track these down so that citations were quoted from the original works, rather than being my translation of a translation. I read as much as I could in English, as I had done with the Anctil translation, so I could familiarize myself with the concepts and thereby come up with the most appropriate terminology and expressions in English.

The essays in the book covered different historically themed media: from films and television series to video games such as *Civilization*, *Assassin's Creed*, and *Minecraft*, to name only a few examples. Other chapters dealt with museum exhibitions, historic sites and monuments, and built heritage. Although I enjoy visiting museums, in addition to being a consumer of historical literature, I was unfamiliar with much of the content: in particular, I had never played a video game in my life. In addition, the writing was sometimes repetitive, and not always clear. As I completed each chapter, I sent a list of questions to one of the co-editors, who responded promptly and courteously. However, as he was not fully proficient in English, he could not provide precise terminology or phraseology; instead, he paraphrased the unclear sections in French.

The two books of nonfiction deal with history – which falls within both humanities and social sciences, and which cuts across a range of fields, from the arts to more "scientific" or number-heavy areas like demographics. Even the scholarly apparatus – including notes, references, and bibliography – requires a kind of "translation" since the format, right down to capitalization and punctuation, changes from one language to another.

## SHIFTING BOUNDARIES

From my experience in translating fiction, precise terminology also matters in literature. In Mihali's *A Ramshackle Home*, which takes place in Romania, I was frequently on the hunt for *le mot juste* to describe the architecture of the dilapidated house in question and document the variety of weeds that had taken over the abandoned garden. Farhoud's *Happiness Has a Slippery Tail*, which recounts the experience of Lebanese immigrants to Quebec, required research on certain aspects of Lebanese culture, including Arabic proverbs. In translating such works, it is important

to conduct the research required to transfer the substance set out by the original author (by translating the concepts, using appropriate terminology, and conveying as much factual material as can possibly be carried across linguistic and cultural borders). But it is equally important to convey the author's tone and artistry. Examples such as these serve to blur the way in which texts are categorized. Previously, "scientific" texts were viewed as essentially "communicative" or "informational", and their meaning thought to be more important than capturing the style or aesthetics of the text. Literary texts, in contrast, were to have an "expressive" function, with less attention paid to what could be deemed research.

In *History is a Contemporary Literature* (2018), which purports to be a "manifesto" for the social sciences, Ivan Jablonka makes a case for historiography that unashamedly incorporates the skills, creativity, and imagination of writers. Inventiveness, according to the author, comes into play from the outset, reflected in the way data is collected and interrogated. Writers have always been at the forefront of historical research, showing that the habits, customs, and lives of ordinary people can be the focus of the historian's attention. Literature, Jablonka goes on to argue, can still occupy a place among the heuristic techniques available to historians. However, he draws the line at invented and unproven facts.

There is an argument to be made, finally, for regarding all translation – whether of social sciences and humanities texts or of literary ones – as involving both research and creation. This can help to upend the long-standing view of translation as a subordinate art or craft – one that persists in academic circles where the practice of translation is undervalued in relation to more conventional forms of scholarship.

## NOTES

[1] In this case, interestingly, the translation is not literary but instead about the reorganization of an office. The translator is doing it for the money, although he derives pleasure from its challenges.

[2] Declining enrolments in translation schools, in Canada at least, have been attributed to the AI effect.

[3] *History of the Jews in Quebec* (2021) was not eligible for a Canada Council translation grant, although I did obtain (less generous) funding from the Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences. In 2022, I received a GG from the Canada Council for this translation, which they had not funded.

[4] See also Apter 2008.

[5] Much work has been done on women translators recently, moving away from viewing women as subordinate and thus engaged in the inferior activity of translation, to affirming the significance and power of translation. See Brown 2022.

[6] See Cusset 2008, for example.

[7] Munday proposes that a "microhistory" of translation and translators be undertaken to provide insights into the "conditions, working practices and identity of translators and [...] their interaction with other participants in the translation process." This kind of "small-scale" investigation is fruitful because it can "shed light on the bigger picture of the history of translation" (2014, 64–65).

[8] When asked whether translation theory can "help" to make translating easier, my reflex is to answer that it cannot; on the other hand, theoretical concepts can help to describe the translation process. I have attempted to do so in a "translator's note" (Woodsworth 2021), in an article, about the same translation, foregrounding the unique profile of the author as "translator-historian" (2021), and in a related piece specifically labelled a translation "memoir" (Woodsworth 2024).

[9] In my early years as a professional translator, I worked at the Department of National Defence, where I dealt with a vast variety of technical subjects – ranging from battleships to chemical and biological warfare, from marching bands to lawsuits and regimental dinners.

[10] As an immigrant to Canada (of Hungarian descent), I have been interested in what is called *littérature migrante* – literature by and about immigrants. Canada is home to significant numbers of New Canadians, who sometimes write in their mother tongue and then self-translate their work into one of the official languages (Felicia Mihali, for example, wrote in Romanian and then translated her work into French); alternatively, some elect to write directly in either French or English (as did Abla Farhoud, for example). Their writing, in all cases, bears the traces of their background and contains occurrences of multilingualism, which contributes to the challenges faced by the translator.

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