Translation theories

Introduction

The history of translation theories, beginning with ancient Roman thinkers who first articulated principles for rendering texts, represents a continuous negotiation of fundamental priorities. This evolution is driven by the enduring tension between two core ideals: the demand for literal accuracy, which seeks to preserve the exact form and content of the source, and the pursuit of fluent adaptation, which aims to recreate the spirit and effect of the original for a new audience. Across centuries, this central debate has shaped translation practices, responding to changing cultural, religious, and philosophical needs while remaining the essential framework for understanding how meaning is transferred between languages.

Roman Origins (1st Century BCE)

Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 BCE), in his essay *De optimo genere oratorum* (46 BCE), introduced the "sense-for-sense" (sensum de sensu) method while translating Greek speeches by Isocrates and Demosthenes into Latin. He rejected "word-for-word" (verbum pro verbo) translation as a mechanical process that produces awkward results, like "counting out gold coins instead of weighing their worth." Cicero aimed for oratorical impact, adapting freely to suit Latin readers.

Horace (65–8 BCE), in *Ars Poetica* (c. 19 BCE), echoed this by warning against being a "fidus interpres" (faithful interpreter) who slavishly copies words. He urged translators to "not always follow the footsteps of your original" and to innovate with new words if needed, treating poetry translation as creative liberty.

The Roman Blueprint: Rivalry Over Fidelity

The ideas of Cicero and Horace in the 1st century BCE didn't just start a debate—they created a whole new way of thinking about moving ideas between languages. Before them, translation (especially of Greek works into Latin) was often seen as a necessary but lesser task, like copying.

Cicero and Horace changed this by insisting that translation was a high-level art, equal to original writing. They did this by making two revolutionary arguments:

1. The Goal is Impact, Not Copying

When Cicero said he translated Greek speeches "not as a translator, but as an orator," he was making a huge claim. He was saying:

  The audience matters most. A Roman speech needed to persuade Romans, not sound like a Greek speech. So, he changed examples, rhythms, and phrases to have the same effect on his readers as the original had on Greeks.

The metaphor of "weighing gold, not counting coins" became famous. It means true value lies in the overall meaning and power, not in a one-for-one swap of words. A literal, word-for-word translation would be like insisting on exactly 100 coins, even if they were made of copper, instead of accepting a smaller pile of pure gold of equal value.

2. The Translator as a Creative Rival

Horace's warning against being a "fidus interpres" (a faithful/bound translator) is often misunderstood. He wasn't saying to be unfaithful to the original's spirit. He was saying slavish, word-for-word copying is actually a betrayal of the original's artistry.

He encouraged translators to have the confidence to "not always follow the footsteps." If the original used a brilliant metaphor that would sound silly in Latin, a good translator should invent an equally brilliant new metaphor in Latin.

This redefined the translator's job. The ideal translator was now a skilled artist in their own language, entering into a kind of creative competition with the source author to see who could best move or delight an audience.

Why This Was a Big Deal: The Two Paths

This Roman moment set up the two main paths (or philosophies) all future translators would argue about:

Path A: Sense-for-Sense (Cicero/Horace's Path)

Priority: The meaning, beauty, and effect on the new reader.

Method: Adapt, rearrange, and creatively rewrite so the translation feels natural and powerful in the new language.

Translator's Role: An orator or artist.

Path B: Word-for-Word (The Path They Rejected)

Priority: The exact words and structure of the original text.

Method: Follow the source text as closely as possible, even if the result sounds awkward or confusing.

Translator's Role: A faithful copier or craftsperson.

In Simple Terms: Cicero and Horace argued that a great translation is like a masterful cover song. A bad cover tries to mimic every single note of the original exactly, often losing its energy. A great cover understands the song's soul—its emotion and message—and then recreates that feeling using the best strengths of a new voice and instrument, making it resonate with a different audience.

This founding Roman idea—that translation is an act of creative reinterpretation for a new culture—is the cornerstone of Western translation theory. Every major debate for the next 2,000 years would, in some way, be a reaction to or refinement of the choice they laid out.

Patristic Era (4th Century CE)

St. Jerome (c. 347–420 CE), in *Letter to Pammachius* (De optimo genere interpretandi, 395 CE), cited Cicero and Horace to defend sense-for-sense for secular texts. Translating the Bible (Vulgate), he used word-for-word for the Old Testament Hebrew but sense-for-sense for the New Testament Greek, prioritizing meaning over form to convey divine intent accurately.

The Divine Dilemma: St. Jerome's Split Standard

St. Jerome is the pivotal figure who took Cicero's "sense-for-sense" vs. "word-for-word" framework and applied it to the highest-stakes text imaginable: the Bible. His approach wasn't a single choice, but a strategic split based on the nature of the text and the nature of truth.

1. The Secular vs. Sacred Justification

In his famous letter, Jerome made a clear distinction that would guide translators for centuries:

   For Secular Texts (history, philosophy, literature): He fully endorsed Cicero and Horace. Here, the goal was eloquence and clarity for the Roman reader. Translators should feel free to adapt, rephrase, and rival the original's artistry. The authority lay in the author's human intellect, which could be respectfully reinterpreted.

   For Sacred Scripture (the Bible): The rules changed entirely. Here, the authority was not human but divine. The very words themselves were often considered inspired. This created a massive problem: how do you faithfully translate the "Word of God" without altering its holy meaning?

2. The "Vulgate" Compromise: Two Methods, One Bible

Jerome's monumental Latin translation, the Vulgate, became the ultimate case study of this tension. He didn't pick one method; he used both, depending on the source language:

   Old Testament (from Hebrew): He leaned word-for-word. Why? Because Hebrew was seen as a sacred, mysterious language, and its very syntax was believed to hold hidden theological truths. A free translation might lose a divine mystery embedded in the original phrasing.

   New Testament (from Greek): He used sense-for-sense. Why? Because Koinē Greek was a common trade language. The Gospels were written to communicate a message clearly. Here, Jerome prioritized conveying the divine intent (sensum) and doctrinal meaning accurately to Latin-speaking congregations over mimicking Greek sentence structure. The goal was orthodox understanding, not literal replication.

3. The Lasting Paradox

Jerome's legacy created the central paradox of pre-modern translation:

The "Word of God" Dilemma: If every word of scripture is divinely inspired, then changing any word risks heresy. This argues for extreme literal, word-for-word translation.

The "Message of God" Imperative: If scripture's purpose is to save souls, then it must be understood. This argues for sense-for-sense translation to ensure clear teaching and doctrinal correctness.

In Simple Terms: Think of Jerome as a translator working under two different bosses with opposite orders.

For his Secular Boss, the order was: "Make this Greek idea sound brilliant in Latin so our people appreciate it."

For his Divine Boss, the order was: "Transmit my sacred truth without a single error or alteration."

His solution was a brilliant, if inconsistent, compromise: he translated poetry like a poet, but scripture like a priest. He showed that the "best" method depends entirely on the purpose of the text and the belief system of the culture. This pragmatic split established that translation theory is not just about language—it's about faith, power, and what a society believes is truly sacred in a text.

Medieval and Renaissance Advances

<u>The Middle Ages (around 5th–15th century)</u>

In the Middle Ages, literalism dominated Bible translations, influenced by Jerome, with figures like Boethius (c. 480–524 CE) mixing approaches in philosophical works. Renaissance humanists revived classical freedom; Étienne Dolet (1509–1546) added principles like capturing the author's spirit and using idiomatic target language.

John Dryden (1631–1700), in his 1680 preface to *Ovid's Epistles*, classified methods as metaphrase (literal), paraphrase (sense-for-sense), and imitation (loose adaptation), favoring paraphrase for poetry.

<u>Medieval and Renaissance Advances in Translation Theory</u>

During the Middle Ages, Bible translation in Western Europe was deeply shaped by the authority of Saint Jerome and his Latin Vulgate. Jerome's well-known distinction between translating *verbum e verbo* (word-for-word) and *sensum de sensu* (sense-for-sense), articulated in his *Letter to Pammachius*, became foundational for later debates (Jerome, trans. 1997). Although Jerome himself defended sense-for-sense translation—except in the case of Scripture, where theological precision required caution—medieval translators increasingly leaned toward literalism, especially in religious texts. This tendency was reinforced by the belief that sacred language carried doctrinal authority and that deviation from the original wording might risk heresy (Robinson, 2002; Munday, 2016).

In philosophical and scholarly contexts, however, a more flexible approach sometimes emerged. Boethius (c. 480–524 CE), known for transmitting Greek philosophy to the Latin West, adopted mixed strategies in his translations of Aristotle and other classical works. While striving for terminological precision, Boethius also adapted structures to suit Latin intellectual discourse, demonstrating an early awareness of the tension between fidelity to form and clarity of meaning (Copeland, 1991). His work illustrates that medieval translation was not uniformly literal but rather conditioned by genre, purpose, and audience.

The Renaissance marked a significant shift in translation theory, influenced by humanism and the rediscovery of classical texts. Renaissance scholars emphasized eloquence, rhetorical effectiveness, and stylistic elegance in the target language. Étienne Dolet (1509–1546), in *La manière de bien traduire d'une langue en aultre* (1540), formulated five principles of good translation. Among these were the requirements to understand fully the author's meaning, avoid word-for-word rendering, use natural expressions in the target language, and reproduce the tone and intention of the original text. Dolet thus explicitly promoted capturing the "spirit" rather than the mere letter of the source, aligning translation with rhetorical and humanist ideals (Dolet, 1540/1995; Bassnett, 2014).

By the seventeenth century, debates about translation method became more systematically theorized. In his preface to *Ovid's Epistles* (1680), John Dryden famously categorized translation into three types: **metaphrase** (word-for-word), **paraphrase** (sense-for-sense), and **imitation** (free adaptation). Dryden rejected strict metaphrase as stylistically inadequate and

viewed imitation as potentially excessive. He favored paraphrase, particularly for poetry, as a balanced method that preserved meaning while allowing stylistic flexibility in the target language (Dryden, 1680/1992). His tripartite classification became highly influential and anticipates later theoretical distinctions between literal and free translation.

Overall, the medieval and Renaissance periods reveal a gradual evolution from doctrinal literalism toward greater recognition of linguistic, rhetorical, and cultural mediation. This shift laid important groundwork for modern translation theory, where questions of fidelity, equivalence, and stylistic adaptation continue to shape scholarly debate.

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