

GUEST EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

HISTORY AS TRANSLATION: SEARCHING FOR TRANSLATION IN THE TRACES OF HISTORY

Over the past few decades, translation studies has shown an increasing interest in historical themes. This emerging focus has led to a wide range of collaborative initiatives¹ and publications that seek to offer a thorough understanding of how history and translation intersect.

Central to this interdisciplinary dialogue is the idea of an intrinsic connection between translation and history. Translation has undeniably shaped historical processes across different periods and cultures, while historical contexts, in turn, play a crucial role in understanding translational practices. As aptly observed in the manifesto of the History and Translation network, “there is no history without translation and no translation without history”², since both are concerned with uncovering the past and interrogating the ways in which language—deeply entangled with power relations and social asymmetries—operates within historical discourse. In a similar vein, André Lefevere and Susan Bassnett (1998, p. 6) stress that “[t]ranslation is in history, always. It is, in many cases, a vital factor within history, and the more we learn about its history, the more obvious this fact becomes”.

Among the most influential academic contributions to this field are George Bastin and Paul Bandia's (2006) *Charting the Future of Translation History*, Theo Hermans' (2022) *Translation and History: A Textbook*, Christopher Rundle's (2022) *The Routledge Handbook of Translation History*, and Lieven D'hulst's (2025) *A Cultural History of Translation*. Alongside these broader theoretical reflections, numerous studies have focused on the history of translation and the historical role of translators themselves. A landmark example is *Translators through History*, edited by Jean Delisle and Judith Woodsworth ([1995]/2012), which traces the contribution of translators across different eras. Equally significant are the collective volumes *Translation under Fascism*, edited by Christopher Rundle and Kate Sturge (2010), and *Translation under Communism*, edited by Christopher Rundle, Anne Lange, and Daniele Monticelli (2022), both of which attempt to map translational activity within authoritarian and totalitarian regimes.

Nevertheless, without in any way diminishing the important contribution these studies have made to both translation studies and history, it should be noted that much of this research tends to conceptualize translation primarily as an interlingual activity, identifying temporal gaps, along with cultural, ideological, and linguistic aspects, as some of the main challenges faced by translators. In this context, this special issue of *Translation Matters* aims to move beyond existing approaches by reconsidering translation outside the

¹ Most notably the international research network History and Translation (<https://historyandtranslation.net/>), established in 2021 by scholars such as Christopher Rundle, Hephzibah Israel, Outi Paloposki, Daniele Monticelli, and Vicente Rafael, among others. Another example is the digital portal devoted to the history of translation in Spain (<https://phte.upf.edu/>), created by Francisco Lafarga and Luis Pegenaute, which documents the evolution of translation activity in Spain from the medieval period to the present day.

² See <https://historyandtranslation.net/manifesto/> (Accessed: 12 June 2026).

limits of a strictly interlingual framework. More specifically, it invites readers to explore the possibility of understanding history itself as a form of translation in the broadest sense, as a ubiquitous practice (Blumczynski, 2016), while engaging with the implications of such a perspective.

The conception of history as a form of translation is by no means a recent development; it has its roots in critical historiography. For instance, Hayden White ([1987]/1990, p. 1) describes narrative—and therefore history—as “the problem of how to translate knowing into telling, the problem of fashioning human experience into a form assimilable to structures of meaning that are generally human rather than culture-specific”. As he points out, historians may feel uneasy with the idea that their works involve translating ‘facts’ into ‘fiction’; nevertheless, this process is an inherent aspect of historical writing (White, 1978, p. 92). In this sense, White ([1987]/1990, pp. 188–189) underscores that

[h]istorians have always used some version of a theory of language to assist them in their work of ‘translating’ meaning across the historical continuum in order to ‘make sense’ of their documents. It would appear, therefore, that the question confronting contemporary historians is not whether they will utilize a linguistic model to aid them in their work of translation but what kind of linguistic model they will use. And this is especially crucial for intellectual historians, who are concerned above all with the problem of meaning and that of translating between different meaning systems, whether as between past and present or between the documents and those readers of history books who wish to know what these documents ‘really mean’.

Alun Munslow (1997, p. 6; 2012, p. 150) also argues that history is fundamentally “the process of translating evidence into facts” and is essentially “a translation exercise”. Historical writing can be seen as translating between different mediums (LaCapra, [1983]/1994, p. 26), where the past is converted into written form and interpreted through contemporary concepts (Jenkins, [1991]/2003, pp. 15–16).

In this context, historians act as translators bridging the past and the present. As Peter Burke (2005, p. 3) aptly states, “[i]f the past is a foreign country [...], then historians may be regarded as translators between past and present”. A similar idea is expressed by Paul Hernadi (1976, p. 247), who argues that “[t]o the extent that the historian succeeds in communicating ‘thoughts, things, and images’ as ‘words, names, and signs’, he translates — from the idiom of events, forever past, into the idiom of continually present discourse”.

Several philosophers have likewise reflected on history in terms of transmission and translation. In his unpublished seminar *History and Truth*, for example, Jacques Derrida conceives of history as a transfer, a transmission, as something perpetually in motion (see Baring, 2014, p. 176), like translation itself. And in *After Babel*, George Steiner ([1975]/1976, p. 29) also frames the past through the paradigms of translation and reading:

The process of diachronic translation inside one's own native tongue is so constant, we perform it so unawares, that we rarely pause either to note its formal intricacy or the decisive

part it plays in the very existence of civilization. By far the greatest mass of the past as we experience it is a verbal construct. History is a speech-act, a selective use of the past tense. Even substantive remains such as buildings and historical sites must be 'read', i.e. located in a context of verbal recognition and placement. [...] But each reading, each translation differs, each is undertaken from a distinctive angle of vision.

The conception of 'history as translation', introduced by critical historiography, has recently been systematically explored in one of the most comprehensive and innovative works on the intersection of historiography and translation studies, *La traducción y la(s) historia(s). Nuevas vías de investigación*, by África Vidal Claramonte (2018). In this monograph, the author challenges the traditional view of history as an objective account of 'reality', positing instead that history is not a single text, but rather texts that rewrite and translate 'reality' intralingually (Vidal Claramonte, 2018, p. 2). She thus encourages readers to reconsider history as an intralingual form of translation that should always be conceived in the plural, so as to avoid the danger of a single History (Adichie, 2009), namely, the history of the victors.

Similarly, Luigi Alonzi's (2023) *History as a Translation of the Past: Case Studies from the West*, reviewed in this special issue by **Celestine Mannuthy Babu**, approaches historical interpretation as a translation process. In his introduction, Alonzi (2023, p. 1) argues that interpreting the past can be seen as an "act of translation, both epistemologically and cognitively".

Another contribution is Margarita Savchenkova's (2024) work, *La traducción emocional de la historia. La memoria traumática en la obra de Svetlana Alexiévich*, also reviewed in this issue by **Inés Carril Vega**. Savchenkova explores how history, translation, traumatic memory, and emotions intersect in the context of (re)writing Soviet history. She takes the work of Svetlana Alexievich, winner of the 2015 Nobel Prize in Literature, as a central case study.

More recently, África Vidal Claramonte's (2025) *Translating His-stories*, likewise reviewed in this issue by **Javier de la Morena-Corrales**, further develops the line of inquiry initiated in her 2018 work. In this publication, she reflects on how women engage in the process of (re)translating histories that have traditionally been narrated from male perspectives.

Going further, it is important to note that the understanding of history through the lens of translation increasingly transcends the textual realm. For example, Peter Burke (1997) employs the concept of *translatio* to analyze the emergence of the carnival tradition in the Americas. In the same vein, Sergei Oushakine (2013) invokes the idea of translation when discussing the military parades that the Russian government organizes annually to mark the end of the war between Nazi Germany and the USSR. For Oushakine (2013, p. 272), these patriotic celebrations function not simply as acts of remembrance, but as performative practices based on symbolic reenactment, through which the past is translated into present-day physical space.

Scholars working within the field of conceptual history frequently draw on the notion of translation to illustrate the intricate process of both establishing and operationalizing concepts (see Pernau and Sachsenmaier, 2016). Following Reinhart Koselleck's (2016) line of thought, Kari Palonen (2016, p. 174) maintains that "every translation, as an act in time, involves a conceptual history of the movement between the translatable and translated". He further suggests that translation itself may be understood as a 'method' of conceptual history.

Additionally, some researchers within the history of emotions have turned to translation-oriented approaches. A prime example is William M. Reddy's monograph ([2001]/2004), *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions*. Drawing on anthropological and psychological research, Reddy ([2001]/2004, p. 86) points out that "every expressive act can be viewed as the outcome of convergent translation tasks. Sensory, linguistic, relational, and status codes are all in play in the articulation of the expression". In order to trace the evolution of emotions in modern France, Reddy introduces the concept of 'emotive', a term deeply intertwined with the notion of translation. According to Reddy, the 'emotive' links the expression of emotions with emotional experience itself, representing the interpretative effort through which we translate our feelings.

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As the previous discussion has shown, a growing number of studies have begun to approach history as translation. The contributions included in this special issue aim to further develop and enrich the existing research. Moving beyond the strictly interlingual realm, the articles examine different historical periods and geographical contexts through the conceptual lens of history as translation. Collectively, they explore the intersections between history and translation, focusing on the ways in which historical processes, narratives, and memories may be interpreted as forms of translation.

The opening contribution to this special issue of *Translation Matters*, authored by **Luigi Alonzi**, lays the theoretical foundations for the volume. After providing a broad bibliographical overview of the intersections between history and translation—necessarily engaging with seminal works by Theo Hermans (2022) and Christopher Rundle (2012)—Alonzi proposes the use of translation as an analytical framework for interpreting historical phenomena. Adopting an interdisciplinary perspective, the author examines the historian's role as a mediator whose work always entails acts of translation. In this regard, historians mediate between past and present by translating cultures, ideologies, and social practices of distant periods into forms intelligible to contemporary readers (see also Burke, 2005; Hernadi, 1976). He conceptualizes history as a mode of 'translated presence', in which multiple temporal layers interact within the present and every historical object is regarded as something translated that must continually be retranslated for future contexts.

The article by **Adrián Izquierdo** explores the relationship between translation and political biography in early modern historiography through the works of the French historiographer Pierre Matthieu. The author shows that historical writing during this period functioned as a translational practice operating on two levels. On the one hand, it involved a temporal dimension, whereby figures from antiquity and the medieval past—such as Sejanus or Philippa of Catania—were reinterpreted as political models through which Matthieu could indirectly criticise contemporary royal favourites. On the other hand, it entailed a linguistic and cultural dimension, as these texts were translated into different languages and adapted to new political contexts. By analysing the Spanish and English versions of Matthieu's narratives, Izquierdo demonstrates how translation enabled political biographies to resonate with local realities and anxieties. Ultimately, the study highlights that the historian is an active cultural mediator who constructs meaning through processes of adaptation, selection, reformulation, and omission, thereby revealing translation as a prime element of historiographical practice itself. In doing so, this work echoes the arguments advanced in Alonzi's contribution to this special issue.

Estibaliz Valle, for her part, examines the theatre of Olympe de Gouges during the French Revolution. This paper underscores that De Gouges' plays not only documented revolutionary events, but also mediated political experience by transforming it into theatrical discourse. Through a detailed analysis of four plays, the author identifies different modes of translation, including spatial-social translation to represent revolutionary sociability, allegorical-memorial translation to reinterpret the political memory of figures such as Mirabeau, crisis translation to provide moral coherence to violence, and affective-mythopoetic translation to reconfigure military victories into political myths. The paper positions De Gouges' dramaturgy as a performative mediation that reveals how theatre can function as a tool for giving meaning to history as it unfolds.

David Gibbons's article, which follows, revisits *Storia della colonna infame* by Alessandro Manzoni through the prism of history as translation, proposing that Manzoni's historiographical practice constitutes a process of translation between past and present. According to Gibbons, Manzoni strategically employed a text written two centuries earlier as a means of indirect political commentary on his own historical context of nineteenth-century Italy under Austrian censorship. This strategy enabled him to 'synchronize' distinct temporalities and address political issues from a relatively protected position.

In his contribution, **Charles Cheung** invites readers to approach the rich history of China through the viewpoint of a twentieth-century Portuguese journalist, José de Freitas. Cheung's case study is *A China antiga e moderna* (1941), which he explores through the notion of so-called 'double foreignness'. This concept refers to the way in which the temporal distance of the past is intensified by the cultural and linguistic distance involved in narrating the history of a foreign civilization. The author demonstrates how Freitas, working within the context of 1940s Portugal, employed both interlingual and cultural translation to rewrite predominantly Francophone sources. Through strategies of adaptation, selection, omission, and simplification, China's long and heterogeneous past

was totally reshaped into a coherent form accessible to Portuguese audiences. The paper thus shows how the use of European references and stereotyped images transformed the complexity of Chinese millennial history into a linear and simplified historical account.

The next contribution shifts the focus to a different geographical and historical context through the study of **Tamara Barakat**, whose research brings together translation, oral history, memory, and trauma. In this paper, Barakat proposes that translation can serve as a methodological tool capable of producing embodied, affective, and experiential forms of knowledge about the past. Drawing on the concept of the 'anarchive', she seeks to capture the sensory and emotional dimensions of history, often overlooked by traditional archival systems. Barakat centers her analysis on the artwork *Drawing the Kafr Qasem Massacre* by Samia Halaby, in order to show how experiential translation (Campbell and Vidal, 2025) transforms oral testimonies from survivors of the 1956 massacre in Palestine into a multimodal visual narrative. In this way, the artwork recovers and preserves the memory of marginalized communities, while also illustrating translation's capacity to mediate traumatic experience beyond merely linguistic realms.

Parina Ghomi Oskoui's paper argues that the dubbing of historical films constitutes a process through which the past is reconstructed and adapted to new contexts. Through an analysis of Hollywood films dubbed into Persian, the author demonstrates that dubbing functions as a form of mediation that frequently softens or removes references to sexuality, religion, and politics in order to align them with prevailing norms in Iran. The study positions dubbing as a historiographical practice and as the final stage in a chain of translations: from historical events to written accounts, from written accounts to cinematic narratives, and from cinematic narratives to dubbed narratives.

The next two articles turn to the history of Germany, though they approach it from two different perspectives: one through the personal testimonies of translators, and the other through the medium of museum exhibition practices. In the first case, **Hanna Blum** investigates the historiography and memory politics surrounding the German Democratic Republic by mobilizing the concept of 'narrative translation'. She explains that, following German reunification, dominant narratives recontextualized the socialist past in ways that legitimized the new political order. Blum thus contrasts institutional narratives—focused on repressions and the failure of the so-called 'illegitimate state' (*Unrechtsstaat*)—with oral testimonies from translators who worked in East Germany. Their accounts constitute a 'counter-translation', revealing experiences marked by professional precarity, loss of status, and disorientation during the *Die Wende*. The study contends that historiography itself operates as a political translation that frequently marginalizes and silences alternative viewpoints. Blum, therefore, calls for a more plural historiography, capable of moving beyond the opposition between condemnation of dictatorship and nostalgia for the socialist past.

For her part, **Joy McClean** examines the exhibition 'Roads not Taken' at the German Historical Museum (Berlin) through a translational lens, arguing that this exhibition acts as a form of 'subjunctive translation'. By presenting fourteen decisive moments in German

history alongside what 'might have happened', 'Roads not Taken' challenges the notion of a single and linear historical narrative, positioning visitors as active co-translators of the past. McClean emphasizes that the artistic design and spatial organization of the exhibition—particularly the physical separation between areas associated with 'reality' and 'possibility'—foster an experimental and participatory mode of historical discovery. Finally, the study underscores that the exhibition's significance lies in revealing history as an open and continually mediated process of construction.

The final article in this special issue likewise investigates the intersection between translation and museum spaces, though within markedly different temporal and geographical settings. In her contribution, **Min-Hsiu Liao** explores the Red Fort in Taiwan as a 'space of translation', where history is reassembled through the interplay between the material place and the textual memory preserved in the writings of foreign travelers. Central to Liao's analysis is Jackson Chen's Mandarin translation of the nineteenth-century diary written by John Dodd. She argues that Chen assumes the role of 'translator-author', using prefaces and extensive footnotes to revisit and challenge the colonial perspective embedded in the source text. The paper demonstrates how this heavily mediated translation is incorporated into the museum's multimodal practices, including interactive games and theatrical performances. Through these practices, textual memory is transformed into a 'third space' of cultural production. Liao contends that the past is a contested field in which translators and curators determine which aspects of history are reactivated and made visible for contemporary audiences.

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As a translation studies researcher and historian, I could not agree more with Paul Hernadi (1976, p. 247), who described History with a capital 'H' as an irretrievably lost original. The articles gathered in this special issue not only offer a variety of perspectives on the study of history as translation, but also recover and bring together overlooked stories, thereby shedding further light on the past. Although the past can never emerge as a single, clear, and complete reflection—since it "comes to us refracted through translational processes" (Johnston, 2016, p. 240)—, these multiple histories-in-translation may nevertheless contribute to richer, more plural, and more heterogeneous images of distant realities.

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