

HERMENEUTIC PERSPECTIVES ON CONTEMPORARY TRANSLATION METHODOLOGY

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Abstract:

Hermeneutics – traditionally the philosophy of understanding texts – has become a central lens for theorising and practising translation. By reframing the translator as both reader and second order author, hermeneutic approaches foreground situated interpretation, subjectivity and the historical embeddedness of meaning. This article synthesises foundational insights from Schleiermacher and Gadamer with recent empirical studies on translator cognition, computer assisted environments and performance oriented “event” views of translation. It shows how the hermeneutic paradigm reshapes four domains: (1) literary translation as the fusion of horizons, (2) specialised translation where pre understanding interacts with terminological regimes, (3) emerging multimodal and staged translations, and (4) translator education. By mapping convergences and controversies, the discussion clarifies hermeneutics’ unique contribution to a plural disciplinary landscape and outlines research priorities for an age of artificial intelligence.

Keywords: Hermeneutics, translational hermeneutics, fusion of horizons, translator subjectivity, performance translation, CAT-mediated translation, multimodal localisation, translator education.

Introduction

Translation scholars increasingly acknowledge that fidelity is not reducible to lexical matching but hinges on “a dynamic act of understanding and re-articulation” (Stolze, 2011). Hermeneutics supplies the philosophical scaffolding for this view, insisting that meaning is co-created by interpreter and text within historically conditioned horizons (Gadamer, 1960/2004). Recent work

– ranging from translational hermeneutics (Yearbook of Translational Hermeneutics, 2023) to studies of translator subjectivity (Liu, 2025) and CAT-mediated poetry translation (Chen, 2024) – suggests that hermeneutic principles remain robust even as digital tools reconfigure practice. The present article surveys this expanding terrain and evaluates hermeneutics’ explanatory power for contemporary challenges.

Friedrich Schleiermacher’s 1813 lecture “On the Different Methods of Translating” established a hermeneutic tension between bringing the reader to the author (foreignising) and bringing the author to the reader (domesticating), a polarity that still structures ethical debate (Schleiermacher, 1813/2012). Martin Heidegger later radicalised hermeneutics by linking language to Being itself, implying that every translation is an ontological re-grounding (Heidegger, 1959). Hans-Georg Gadamer extended this insight, coining the “fusion of horizons” to describe how interpreter and text negotiate meaning through dialogue (Gadamer, 1960/2004). These thinkers collectively repositioned translation as an event of understanding rather than a mere technical operation.

Contemporary Extensions

German scholars such as Fritz Paepcke and Radegundis Stolze have systematised hermeneutic translation into a competency-based model that integrates pre-understanding, situational research and reflective revision (Stolze, 2011). Empirical validation is now emerging: Krüger (2022) uses eye-tracking data to correlate pauses with horizon-adjusting micro-decisions, supporting Stolze’s claim that hermeneutic comprehension guides strategic shifts.

The “translation as event” perspective treats the act itself as performative, embodied and socially staged (Yearbook of Translational Hermeneutics, 2023). By adopting performance studies terminology, this strand underscores the temporality and audience-oriented character of interpreter choices, aligning hermeneutics with sociological turns in translation studies.

Hermeneutic scepticism toward mechanistic equivalence finds new relevance as CAT and neural MT proliferate. Yet Chen (2024) demonstrates that poetry translators working with CAT tools still rely on “hermeneutic breaks” where they pause, reread and adjust machine suggestions to achieve a fusion of aesthetic horizons. This suggests that technology supplements but cannot replace hermeneutic agency.

Applications

Hermeneutics legitimises creative intervention because semantic depth often resides in stylistic nuance and intertextual echoes. Berman (1992) argues that ethically foreignising translations widen the reader's horizon, whereas Venuti (2017) stresses the translator's visibility as an interpreter. Recent case studies – e.g., a Gadamer-informed comparison of Chinese versions of *Counselling for Toads* (Zhang, 2025) – show that explicit negotiation of horizons improves reception by aligning cultural subtexts with target-culture expectations. While terminology management might appear antithetical to hermeneutics, specialised translation still involves horizon-shaping presuppositions. Prandi (2023) finds that biomedical translators' risk assessments are guided by ethical pre-understandings about patient safety, corroborating Heidegger's insight that fore-structures of care orient interpretation.

Audiovisual localisation, surtitling and live interpreting foreground the performative dimension. Studies of staged surtitles in opera reveal that translators calibrate rhythm and colour to induce the audience's hermeneutic participation (Meyer & Bruti, 2022). Such findings extend Schleiermacher's dilemma to multimodal design choices. Hermeneutically informed pedagogy emphasises reflective journals, dialogic workshops and horizon-awareness tasks. Kiraly (2016) shows that portfolios capturing evolving interpretations foster meta-competence and resilience against over-reliance on MT outputs.

Sceptics fault hermeneutics for subjectivism and lack of falsifiability. Pym (2014) warns that overemphasising interpreter agency may obscure power asymmetries and material constraints. However, translational hermeneutics increasingly incorporates critical discourse analysis to situate interpretation within socio-political contexts (Stolze, 2018), thus addressing the critique. A second challenge concerns scalability: neural MT systems generate billions of words daily. Yet research indicates that user post-editing still requires hermeneutic judgement when confronting ambiguity, humor or culturally laden metaphors (Toral & Koehn, 2020). Rather than obsolete, hermeneutics becomes the quality gatekeeper in an automated pipeline.

Three research tracks appear promising. First, mixed-methods studies combining eye-tracking, keystroke logging and think-aloud protocols can map micro-hermeneutic moves in digital contexts. Second, interdisciplinary dialogue with cognitive science may refine the concept of pre-understanding by modelling

how expertise shapes predictive processing (Santiago-Araujo, 2024). Third, ethical hermeneutics should interrogate AI co-agency: how does a fusion of horizons occur when one “participant” is a probabilistic model?

From Schleiermacher’s foreignising impulse to CAT-mediated verse, translation remains an interpretive act rooted in hermeneutic philosophy. Far from a relic, hermeneutics offers a flexible framework for grappling with subjectivity, technology and the performative stakes of meaning transfer. By acknowledging that every translation is an event of understanding, researchers and practitioners can navigate the complexities of multilingual communication with epistemic humility and creative rigour.

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