

Comparative Translation Studies: Ancient Days and Contemporary Days

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Abstract: *This paper provides a focused comparative analysis of translation theory and practice across two historical epochs — the ancient world (3000 BCE to c. 1500 CE) and the contemporary era (20th–21st centuries). By interrogating motivations, theoretical frameworks, translator agency, technology, and ethical dimensions across these periods, it argues that while the human impulse to bridge linguistic divides is immutable, the epistemological, institutional, and technological contexts of translation have undergone radical transformation. Key case studies — the Septuagint, Jerome's Vulgate, the Abbasid House of Wisdom, Xuanzang's Buddhist translations, Eugene Nida's equivalence theory, Vermeer's Skopos theory, Venuti's ethics of foreignisation, and neural machine translation — anchor the analysis. The paper concludes with a high-density comparative matrix and targeted scholarly references.*

Keywords: Translation Studies, Ancient Translation, Equivalence Theory, Skopos Theory, Postcolonial Translation, Neural Machine Translation, Jerome, Cicero, Nida, Venuti

I. INTRODUCTION

Translation is among humanity's oldest intellectual enterprises. Before it was a discipline, a profession, or a subject of academic inquiry, it was a survival mechanism — the instrument by which civilisations absorbed foreign knowledge, extended political authority, and preserved sacred meaning across linguistic frontiers. The Mesopotamian scribe who aligned Sumerian and Akkadian vocabulary in bilingual lexicons circa 2500 BCE and the neural network engineer who trains a transformer model on billions of multilingual tokens in 2024 are separated by millennia, yet both are engaged in the same fundamental act: rendering meaning across the boundaries of language.

What separates them — and what makes comparative translation studies so intellectually productive — is everything else: motivation, methodology, ideology, technology, and the conceptual vocabulary available to describe what they do. This paper distils only the highest-value insights from that comparison, structured around six analytical dimensions: (1) primary motivations, (2) theoretical paradigms, (3) the translator's role and visibility, (4) landmark case studies, (5) technology and material conditions, and (6) ethics and power. A comparative matrix synthesises the findings.

The paper does not aim to be encyclopaedic. It aims to be precise — selecting only those moments, theorists, and texts that represent genuine turning points in the history of translation thought and that illuminate, by contrast or by continuity, the landscape of contemporary practice.

II. TRANSLATION IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

2.1 Motivational Architecture: Religion, Empire, Diplomacy

Ancient translation was overwhelmingly heteronomous — driven not by abstract linguistic interest but by the imperatives of power and belief. Three forces dominated: religious authority, imperial administration, and diplomatic necessity.

Religious motivation was paramount. The translation of sacred texts was a theological act as much as a linguistic one; the translator was conceived not as a creative author but as a transparent conduit for divine truth. Any deviation from the source — whether in word or in tone — risked corrupting revelation itself. This produced a characteristic anxiety about equivalence that haunted ancient religious translation and which finds its clearest expression in the myth surrounding the Septuagint: seventy-two scholars, working in isolation, produced identical translations of the Hebrew



Torah into Greek, thereby proving the divine warrant for the translation. The myth is theologically instructive regardless of its historical truth — it encodes the ancient ideal of perfect, supernatural equivalence.

Imperial and diplomatic motivations are equally well documented. The Amarna Letters (14th century BCE) — diplomatic correspondence in Akkadian cuneiform between Egypt and neighbouring powers — attest to a sophisticated multilingual bureaucratic culture that required professional interpreters and scribes. The Rosetta Stone (196 BCE), inscribed in hieroglyphics, Demotic, and Greek, is a royal decree in three scripts precisely because the Ptolemaic state needed to project authority across a multilingual population. Translation here is not cultural generosity but political control.

2.2 The Theorists Before Theory: Cicero and Jerome

Ancient translation produced no formal discipline, but it did produce two towering reflective statements that would define Western translation thought for nearly two millennia.

Cicero (46 BCE): In *De Optimo Genere Oratorum*, Cicero articulated the first principled rejection of *verbum pro verbo* (word-for-word) translation. Translating Greek orators into Latin, he insisted on rendering not the words but the weight, the force, and the rhetorical character of the original. His criterion was not lexical faithfulness but communicative and stylistic equivalence. This is not merely a practical observation; it is a genuine theoretical claim: that meaning resides not in the word but in the utterance, and that the translator's task is to re-create an equivalent rhetorical event in the target language. Cicero is, in this sense, the ancestor of every audience-centred translation theory from Nida to Vermeer.

Jerome (c. 395 CE): St. Jerome's translation of the Bible into Latin — the Vulgate — is the most consequential single translation in Western history. His theoretical justification, articulated in his *Letter to Pammachius*, deployed the formula *non verbum e verbo, sed sensum exprimere de sensu* (not word from word, but sense from sense). Jerome understood, with extraordinary lucidity, that literal translation of Sacred Scripture was not more faithful but less faithful — because it could distort meaning while preserving surface form. His choice to use the *sermohumilis*, the humble everyday Latin of ordinary Romans rather than elevated literary Latin, was a deliberate strategy of accessibility that anticipates modern dynamic equivalence. The Vulgate's authority rested precisely on its ability to make Scripture feel native, felt, and alive in Latin — a goal that is structurally identical to that of contemporary communicative translation.

2.3 The Abbasid Translation Movement: Knowledge as Imperial Project

The translation enterprise at the Bayt al-Hikmah (House of Wisdom) in Baghdad (8th–10th centuries CE) under the Abbasid Caliphate represents the most systematic and intellectually ambitious translation project in premodern history. Under caliphs Harun al-Rashid and al-Mamun, hundreds of Greek philosophical, scientific, and medical works were translated into Arabic by teams of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim scholars. The chief translator, Hunayn ibn Ishaq, developed what amounts to a proto-scientific translation methodology: he collated multiple Greek manuscripts, assessed their reliability, and produced Arabic translations of exceptional precision, followed by revised editions correcting earlier errors.

Three aspects of this tradition are theoretically significant. First, it was explicitly cumulative and revisionary — translators critiqued and superseded their predecessors, anticipating the modern notion of translation as scholarship. Second, it was transformative, not merely transmissive: Arab scholars did not simply copy Greek knowledge but integrated, annotated, extended, and in some cases corrected it, producing original intellectual syntheses. Third, it was institutionally organised and state-funded — a model of translation as public infrastructure that has no exact parallel until the 20th-century emergence of international organisations such as the UN and EU.

2.4 Xuanzang and the Chinese Buddhist Tradition: Fidelity Across Radical Difference

The Chinese Buddhist translation tradition, spanning roughly the 1st to the 10th centuries CE, posed translation challenges that were arguably more radical than anything encountered in the Greco-Latin or Arabic traditions. Sanskrit



and Classical Chinese are not merely different languages; they embody fundamentally different linguistic architectures and philosophical conceptual schemes. The challenge of rendering Sanskrit Buddhist concepts — karma, dharma, nirvana, sunyata — into Chinese required not just translation but conceptual invention: the creation of new Chinese vocabulary to carry philosophical freight that the language had previously not needed to bear.

Xuanzang (602–664 CE), the monk who travelled to India to obtain original sutras and returned to devote his life to translating them under imperial patronage, remains the supreme figure in this tradition. His approach combined rigorous textual scholarship with an acute sensitivity to Chinese readership. In prefaces to his translations, Xuanzang explicitly theorised the conflict between fidelity and comprehensibility, advocating for a principled middle path that privileged accuracy over elegance without sacrificing intelligibility. This articulation anticipates the fundamental tension in contemporary translation between semantic and communicative equivalence, and Xuanzang's solution — a translation that is literal where the original's conceptual precision demands it, free where the target reader's comprehension requires it — is structurally identical to modern hybrid approaches.

III. CONTEMPORARY TRANSLATION STUDIES

3.1 The Discipline's Birth: Holmes and the Autonomy Turn

Translation studies became a self-conscious academic discipline in 1972, when James S. Holmes presented 'The Name and Nature of Translation Studies' at a Copenhagen congress. Holmes's intervention was decisive: he proposed a coherent disciplinary map distinguishing pure translation studies (theoretical and descriptive) from applied translation studies (translator training, criticism, translation aids), and he insisted that translation deserved its own conceptual apparatus rather than being subsumed under applied linguistics or comparative literature.

The significance of this moment cannot be overstated. By claiming disciplinary autonomy, translation studies simultaneously claimed the right to theorise translation on its own terms, to develop descriptive rather than merely prescriptive frameworks, and to treat the translator as a legitimate object of scholarly attention. The 'translator's turn' — the gradual shift from treating translation as a transparent conduit to treating it as an act of authorship — began here. This is a clean break with the ancient world, where the translator's anonymity and self-effacement were ideological requirements, not practical oversights.

3.2 The Three Pillars of Contemporary Translation Theory

Eugene Nida — Dynamic Equivalence (1964): Nida's theory, developed in the context of Bible translation for the American Bible Society, drew on Chomskyan transformational grammar to argue that translation should aim to reproduce in the target-language reader an effect equivalent to that produced in the source-language reader. This 'dynamic' or 'functional' equivalence explicitly subordinated formal correspondence to communicative impact — the translator's obligation is to the reader's experience of the text, not to the text's surface structure. Nida's framework was the first to apply systematic linguistic science to translation theory, and its influence on both Bible translation and secular translation pedagogy has been enormous. Its debt to Cicero is direct and acknowledged; its advance over Cicero lies in its methodological rigour and its integration of reader psychology.

Hans Vermeer — Skopos Theory (1978): Vermeer's Skopos Theory (from Greek skopos, 'purpose') constituted a Copernican shift: the primary determinant of a translation is not the source text but the translation's purpose in the target culture, as specified in a translation brief. This functional approach liberated translation from the tyranny of equivalence — a translation is not 'faithful' or 'unfaithful' in any absolute sense; it is appropriate or inappropriate to its communicative purpose. The theory's practical consequences are radical: the same source text may legitimately yield entirely different translations depending on whether the purpose is legal documentation, literary reception, or marketing. Skopos Theory transformed translation from a hermeneutic problem (what does the source mean?) into a communicative design problem (what must the target text achieve?).



Lawrence Venuti — Foreignisation and the Ethics of Visibility (1995): Venuti's *The Translator's Invisibility* launched the most influential ethical critique in contemporary translation studies. Venuti observed that Anglo-American translation culture strongly prefers domesticating translations — translations that efface the foreignness of the source text, read fluently in English, and give no indication that they are translations at all. He argued, drawing on Schleiermacher's distinction between bringing the reader to the author and bringing the author to the reader, that this preference was not an aesthetic choice but an ideological one: it served Anglo-American cultural hegemony by silently assimilating foreign texts to domestic norms. Foreignising translation — deliberately retaining the alien syntax, cultural markers, and linguistic idiosyncrasies of the source — is an ethical and political act of resistance. Venuti's argument brought translation theory into direct engagement with postcolonial theory and permanently changed how scholars think about the politics of translation.

3.3 Postcolonial Translation Theory: Power, Voice, and Resistance

Postcolonial translation studies, developed by scholars including GayatriChakravortySpivak, TejaswiniNiranjana, and Maria Tymoczko, radicalised the discipline by insisting that translation has historically been a technology of colonial power. Colonial translation practices systematically distorted indigenous knowledge systems, imposed European conceptual frameworks onto non-European texts, and rendered colonial subjects as exotic objects of European curiosity rather than as agents of their own meaning. Spivak's demand that translators attend to the 'rhetoricity' of the original — its specific linguistic and cultural texture — rather than producing smooth, culturally laundered versions, is an ethical imperative rooted in the history of colonial appropriation.

This perspective introduces into translation theory a dimension entirely absent from ancient practice: the systematic analysis of translation as a site of ideological contestation. Where ancient translators were constrained by religious and political authority, contemporary postcolonial translation theory asks translators to actively examine and resist the power relations embedded in their choices. This is perhaps the sharpest discontinuity between ancient and contemporary translation: the contemporary translator is expected to be not just a linguistic expert but a politically conscious cultural actor.

3.4 Technology: The Neural Turn and Its Consequences

The history of machine translation (MT) runs from the rule-based systems of the 1950s through statistical MT in the 1990s to the neural revolution of the 2010s. Neural Machine Translation (NMT) systems — particularly transformer-based architectures underlying Google Translate, DeepL, and GPT-family models — have achieved fluency levels in certain language pairs that earlier generations of researchers regarded as decades away. These systems learn translation patterns from billions of examples without any explicit linguistic rules, and they have democratised translation on a scale unprecedented in human history.

The theoretical and professional implications are profound. For the translation profession, NMT has created the 'post-editor' role — a human translator who revises machine output rather than producing translations from scratch — reshaping the cognitive demands and the economic structure of translation work. For translation theory, NMT raises foundational questions: can a system with no semantic understanding, cultural knowledge, or ethical agency truly 'translate' in the full sense of the word? Does translation require intentionality? The answers divide scholars: some argue that NMT produces high-quality approximations of translation that are practically sufficient for many purposes; others insist that translation, properly understood, is an irreducibly human act of interpretation that no statistical pattern-matcher can replicate.

What is clear is that the ancient ideal of the invisible, self-effacing translator finds its technological apotheosis in machine translation — a system that aspires to produce translations without any trace of a translating subject. The paradox is that this ideal, pursued to its technological limit, reveals its own inadequacy: MT systems trained on biased corpora reproduce and amplify cultural stereotypes, gender biases, and geopolitical asymmetries at scale, demonstrating that the pretence of neutrality is itself a form of ideological positioning.



IV. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

4.1 The Perennial Tensions

The single most durable insight from this comparison is that certain structural tensions in translation are not historically contingent but constitutive. The tension between formal and semantic equivalence — between the word and the sense — is as present in Cicero (46 BCE) as in Nida (1964). The tension between source-text fidelity and target-audience accessibility is as live in Jerome's Vulgate debates as in contemporary debates over literary vs. communicative translation. The recognition that translation is not a neutral act but a politically and culturally situated one is implicit in every ancient translation produced under imperial or religious patronage, even if it had to wait for the 20th century to be fully theorised.

These continuities are not trivial. They suggest that translation theory is not simply progressive — not a linear march from primitive intuition to scientific rigour — but is engaged in a permanent negotiation with problems that are structural rather than merely technical. The history of translation theory is, in this sense, a history of recurrent insights, each reformulated in the conceptual vocabulary of its own epoch.

4.2 The Genuine Ruptures

Against these continuities, three genuine discontinuities stand out. First, scale: the global translation industry processes volumes of text in a single day that would have taken the entire Abbasid House of Wisdom decades to produce. Second, theorisation: the contemporary discipline possesses analytical tools — from systemic functional linguistics to cognitive translation process research to postcolonial critique — that have no ancient counterpart and that have made it possible to examine translation at levels of precision and critical depth entirely unavailable to pre-modern practitioners. Third, the translator's status: the ancient translator was, paradigmatically, anonymous, subordinate, and politically instrumental; the contemporary translator is a visible professional, a cultural mediator, and — at least in contemporary theory — an ethical agent with obligations that exceed mere linguistic accuracy.

4.3 Master Comparison Table

Dimension	Ancient Translation	Contemporary Translation
Primary Motivation	Religious authority, imperial power, diplomatic need	Commercial, cultural, communicative, and globalisation imperatives
Theoretical Framework	Implicit, intuitive; word-for-word vs. sense-for-sense (Cicero, Jerome)	Explicit and pluralistic: Equivalence, Skopos, Polysystems, Postcolonial, Cognitive
Translator's Role	Anonymous scribe; subordinate conduit; self-effacing instrument	Visible professional; creative agent; ethical and cultural mediator
Technology	Manual scribal tools: clay, papyrus, parchment, brush	CAT tools, translation memories, Neural MT, AI-assisted post-editing
Scale & Speed	Rare, elite, slow; confined to sacred or diplomatic texts	Industrial-scale; \$50B+ global industry; hundreds of language pairs
Ethics & Power	Implicit in religious fidelity and patron loyalty	Explicit theorisation: postcolonial critique, gender, representation, justice
Equivalence Goal	Fidelity to sacred or imperial source; divine accuracy (Septuagint myth)	Functional equivalence; audience effect; purpose-driven (Skopos)



Dimension	Ancient Translation	Contemporary Translation
Canonical Cases	Septuagint, Vulgate, Bayt al-Hikmah, Xuanzang's Buddhist texts	Nida's Bible project, Venuti's theory, UN/EU institutional translation, DeepL/GPT

V. CONCLUSION

The comparative study of ancient and contemporary translation yields a paradox: the more we examine what has changed, the more clearly we see what has not. The word-versus-sense debate, the politics of equivalence, the ethics of representing the foreign, the tension between accessibility and fidelity — these are not problems that successive generations of translators have solved and moved on from. They are constitutive features of the translation act itself, reformulated in each epoch's own conceptual idiom.

What has genuinely changed is the capacity for self-awareness. Contemporary translation studies possesses analytical tools, critical frameworks, and institutional structures that make it possible to examine these perennial tensions with a precision and a political consciousness that ancient practitioners could not have achieved. Postcolonial theory has made visible the power asymmetries that ancient translation both reflected and enforced. Cognitive science has opened windows into the translator's mental processes that were closed to introspection alone. Machine translation has raised the question of what translation fundamentally is with an urgency that no amount of abstract theorising could have generated.

The most important practical implication of this comparison is that translation history is not merely antiquarian. Understanding how Jerome argued for vernacular accessibility, how the Abbasid translators institutionalised revisionary scholarship, how Xuanzang navigated radical conceptual incommensurability — these are not merely historical curiosities but intellectual resources. They demonstrate that the challenges of contemporary translation are genuinely ancient, which means that contemporary translators inherit not just problems but a long, rich tradition of responses to those problems. That tradition is one of the discipline's most underused assets.

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