
John Sallis. *On Translation*.
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On Translation, by John Sallis, professor of Philosophy at Pennsylvania State University, is a four-part investigation of translation and its inevitable difficulties.

“The Dream of Nontranslation,” “Scenes of Translation at Large,” “Translation and the Force of Words,” and “Varieties of Untranslatability” are integral in expressing the book’s main theme, which is that in the process of translation there is inevitable error. In this study, Sallis treats translation as “a double theme, corresponding to the difference between treating it in its unrestricted spread...and in its restriction to translation of words.” This double theme of translational theory and practice exists throughout the different chapters, and Sallis brings forth numerous examples to better explain his points. It is also important to note here that the book carries a very philosophical tone in terms of its structure and wording, which might prove difficult for some readers. Lastly, it also shares a distinct historiographical quality in the sense that it includes the author’s opinions about previous work done by philosophers such as Kant, Jakobson, and Schlegel, whose work can be applied to translation studies.

Sallis begins the book with his “Dream of Nontranslation,” which is, in essence, a dream of returning to Babel. The author immedi-

ately proposes a question, “What would it mean to begin thinking beyond all translation?” Sallis answers this question by introducing Kant and his idea that thinking is itself a translation in that it involves one imaginably speaking and listening to oneself and that thinking is a translation from thought to speech. Thus, for Kant, the act of thinking as a translation essentially denies the ideal of nontranslation, even if it is inevitable and necessary for communication. Here the author brings up another point of nontranslation with a contemporary example of the inverse relationship between globalization and linguistic difference: while globalization has facilitated communication between countries, linguistic differences have assured the solidity of their borders. According to Sallis, translation in this setting remains utterly necessary but cannot be successful in creating true regions of nontranslation. In the first section, Sallis also emphasizes the concept of countertranslation, which he exemplifies with Freud’s dream theory and the process of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis is countertranslation of the dream-content to dream-thoughts which, quoting Freud, he presents as fol-

lows: “The dream-thoughts and dream-content lie before us like two presentations of the same content in two different languages, or rather, the dream-content appears to us as a translation of the dream-thoughts into another mode of expression...” Unfortunately, the countertranslation of this dream-world can never be assured of correctly and completely achieving a countertranslation.

The second section, “Scenes of Translation at Large,” discusses the many different realms of translation which range from the very basic mental process of thinking to actual interlingual translation. If thinking itself is a matter of translation, writing is the literal translation of thought to paper. Bringing up the physical possibilities of translation, Sallis addresses the scope of the word, which has a variety of different functions. This could mean translating words and sentences into another language, ideas into actions or, as mentioned before, thoughts into speech. It is here that the author reverts to the etymology of the word translation and its roots in *trans*, across, and *fero*, which means to carry, or bear. Because translation is a transfer of something across a specific border and

language, Sallis offers two options. One is the transfer of meaning, as in moving words and sentences into words and sentences of another language; the other is a transfer of meaning within the same language, the employment of synonyms. At this point in particular, the author points to Jakobson’s inter-lingual vs. intra-lingual translation theories.

In his third section, Sallis investigates the problem of certain instances of “untranslatability” and the difficulty of incorporating foreign words and phrases into a translated text. Specifically noted are the bold or italicized words of a text and the subtler nuances of foreign words in speech, such as when *trans* and *fero* appear in his book. He argues that these words pertain to both languages, an effect visualized in his own terms as “two concentric circles outlining a parergonal band of undecidability.” While in some cases a translation is possible, doing so actually yields a loss in meaning. Furthermore, expressing the words in their true form is a more effective representation. In addressing the singularity of language, the author incorporates the Aristotelian concept of the universality of the soul. According to

Aristotle, although discourse and writing may vary between different humans of distinct cultures, the affections expressed by their souls are based on similar needs and requirements. Investigating discourse, one discovers these same connections: writing translates speech and speech translates affections, or, thoughts.

The final section entitled “Varieties of Untranslatability” concerns how the different facets of discourse and writing make some translations impossible. With regard to poetry, for example, there is a common preoccupation among translators who fear literalism, the interpretation of symbolism and imagery, and the inevitable flattening of loss of meaning in a translated poem. The author does point out, however, that in the best translations there is actually a gain, an unforeseen enhancement of the original work. He also considers the idea of a deliberate

untranslatability using as an example Mimmo Paladino’s series of paintings entitled “EN DO RE.”. Although the title of the series is “EN DO RE,” the letters that actually appear within the works are “EN DE RE,” a direct contrast with the title and a tactic employed purposely by the author.

On Translation is a very philosophically-oriented perspective on some of the ideals and difficulties entwined in the process of translation. Frequent use of complex philosophical terminology invented by the author could prove difficult for some readers. However, the book does provide an effective and in-depth look at some of the unavoidable difficulties of achieving an accomplished translation. Ultimately, Sallis’ goal is to return to Babel, a journey to be undertaken through his ideals of nontranslation and countertranslation.

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