

Omri Asscher, *Machine Translation and Translation Theory*, Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2025, 178 pp., ISBN 9781041000662.

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The past decade has witnessed a rapid progress of machine translation, driven largely by the advent of neural machine translation systems like DeepL and, more recently, multitask generative artificial intelligence models such as OpenAI's GPT series. These technologies, capable of simulating human language, have not only improved the fluency and apparent accuracy of machine outputs but have also impacted the conditions under which translation is conceived, produced, and received (Chang et al. 2024; Lyu et al. 2023). In *Machine translation and Translation Theory*, Omri Asscher undertakes the ambitious task of conceptualizing these technological developments within the established frameworks of translation theory.

Asscher's volume is neither a technical evaluation nor a practical guide. Rather, it positions itself as a theoretical intervention that interrogates how leading paradigms of machine translation intersect with, challenge, or diverge from key human-centered translation theories. In doing so, the author directly engages with a timely concern as the field confronts the implications of what he refers to as the "Machine Translation Era" (p. 4).

The book is structured around an introduction, five thematic chapters (definitions, equivalence, aesthetics, ethics, cross-cultural communication) and a conclusion. Each chapter is enriched with a set of thought-provoking questions and suggestions for future research, encouraging reflection beyond the text itself. The overall structure is logical, guiding readers from questions of

what translation *is* (Chapters One and Two) to considerations of what translation *does* (Chapters Three to Five).

The opening chapter situates machine translation firmly within translation studies. Asscher reconstructs the two overarching categories of definitions that have long divided scholars: prescriptive linguistically-oriented definitions and descriptive approaches. He argues that descriptive approaches are particularly well-suited to account for machine translation, thereby establishing the conceptual groundwork for conceiving the latter as a “full-fledged translational object of inquiry, fully at home in translation studies” (p. 37).

This theoretical alignment underpins the analysis in Chapter Two, dedicated to the long-debated notion of equivalence. Asscher identifies a strong conceptual compatibility between machine translation and Gideon Toury’s Descriptive Translation Studies, arguing that this convergence should serve as a “point of departure” (p. 63) for further theorization.

From ontological reflections, the discussion then turns to the aesthetics of translation. Here, the divergences between human and machine practices become particularly evident: whereas traditional human approaches often valued structural fidelity, machine translation systems prioritize idiomaticity and fluency in the target language (Müller, Rios & Sennrich 2020; Hendy et al. 2023). Automatic evaluation methods reinforce this orientation by largely disregarding the original form. Asscher transforms this apparent theoretical misalignment into a productive opportunity for a functionalist reconceptualization of aesthetics that shifts focus from source text fidelity to the communicative purpose of the translated text.

The volume’s most conceptually ambitious contribution is Chapter Four, where the author delves into the ethical dimension of translation. Asscher moves beyond the already discussed environmental or social impacts of machine translation (e.g. Moniz & Parra Escartín 2023; Moorkens 2022; Moorkens et al. 2025) to shape the latter as a decision-making and explicit ethical agent, with a potential for autonomy and unpredictability. Consequently, he suggests the need to introduce competing ethical considerations that engage with situation-specificities of translation.

Finally, Chapter Five tackles the communicative function of translation. Drawing on previous research, the author emphasizes awareness of machine-mediated communication impacts users’ perceptions of reliability and their willingness to trust translated content. Asscher then elaborates on machine translation’s potential to affect symbolic boundaries between communities.

This progression from translation definition and equivalence to aesthetic, ethical dimensions and cross-cultural communication culminates in a firm concluding statement: machine translation should “be conceived and pursued as a full-fledged historical agent” (p. 161), participating in socio-historical processes in ways that, while distinctive, have telling precedents in the long history of human translation.

The volume’s principal contribution lies in its robust theoretical methodology. Asscher systematically positions automated translation within established paradigms of human-centered translation studies, deliberately avoiding the simplistic “human *versus* machine translation” dichotomy that pervades many contemporary studies. His alternative “human *and* machine translation” framework successfully acknowledges both the convergences and divergences between these agents and offers a more nuanced understanding of their relationship.

Crucially, this work is grounded on an in-depth knowledge of neural machine translation and generative artificial intelligence. This allows Asscher to evaluate the theoretical compatibility of automated systems with human-based theories or, in turn, effectively bridge conceptual gaps, as demonstrated by the functionalist reframing of aesthetics in Chapter Three. Throughout the volume, Asscher avoids definitive conclusions. He acknowledges that his work is intended as a “preliminary discussion” (p. 117), a “thought experiment” (p. 114, 119), and a set of “tentative hypotheses” (p. 135), positioning it as a genuine contribution to ongoing academic research.

Despite the volume’s evident strengths, certain limitations must be noted. Most notably, the absence of empirical analyses of machine-generated outputs necessarily renders some arguments abstract. While this omission aligns with Asscher’s explicitly stated focus on theory, empirical validation might have strengthened key claims without compromising the work’s theoretical orientation. Additionally, the considerable conceptual density, while entirely appropriate for the work’s scholarly objectives, may prove challenging for readers who are less familiar with the field and limit its accessibility.

Overall, *Machine Translation and Translation Theory* stands out as a significant contribution to translation theory. Through clear and precise writing, supported by well-grounded reasoning, Asscher convincingly positions machine translation as a full-fledged translational, ethical and historical agent while still maintaining the human element as the primary frame of reference. This volume deserves recognition as an essential reading for scholars interested in rethinking the theoretical implications of our technological present.

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