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HERMENEUTIC INTERPRETATION AS A FRAMEWORK FOR MEANING RECONSTRUCTION IN TRANSLATION STUDIES

Djamila Rustamovna Abduganiyeva

PhD, Associate Professor

Uzbekistan State World Languages University

Abstract

This article explores hermeneutic interpretation as a foundational framework for understanding how meaning is reconstructed in translation. Building on philosophical hermeneutics and contemporary translation theory, the study argues that translation is an interpretive act shaped by the translator's historical horizon, cultural knowledge, and linguistic intuition. Hermeneutics provides a methodological lens for analyzing ambiguity, polysemy, intertextuality, and cultural embeddedness within source texts. The article highlights the centrality of the hermeneutic circle, the fusion of horizons, and the dialogic nature of understanding as key processes that guide translators in negotiating meaning across languages. These principles are examined through their relevance to literary, technical, and audiovisual translation, demonstrating how interpretive competence influences decisions on equivalence, style, and cultural mediation. The article concludes that hermeneutics deepens translation studies by clarifying the cognitive and ethical dimensions of translational judgment and by offering a robust conceptual basis for analyzing how translators construct meaning in multilingual communication.

Keywords: Hermeneutics, translation studies, meaning reconstruction, interpretation, equivalence, cultural mediation, hermeneutic circle, fusion of horizons, translator agency.



Introduction

Translation has long been described not merely as a linguistic activity but as an act of understanding. From the earliest commentaries on sacred texts to contemporary debates in translation studies, the translator has been viewed as an interpreter who must reconstruct meaning in new cultural, linguistic, and historical contexts. The hermeneutic tradition – rooted in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, Gadamer, and later Ricoeur – offers a powerful lens through which translation can be examined as a dialogic process of sense-making rather than mechanical substitution of words. This essay explores the role of hermeneutics in translation, emphasizing how understanding, interpretation, and the translator’s horizon of experience shape the final text, and how modern scholarship has expanded hermeneutic principles to contemporary literary, audiovisual, and intercultural translation.

Hermeneutics begins with the assumption that meaning is not fixed but emerges through interpretive engagement with the text. Schleiermacher’s foundational claim – that translators must either “bring the reader to the author” or “bring the author to the reader” – establishes the translator as an agent who negotiates between foreignness and familiarity (Schleiermacher, 1813/1992). This negotiation is inherently hermeneutic: it requires an understanding of the author’s intent, the cultural milieu in which the text was created, and the expectations of the target audience. Gadamer later argued that understanding is always shaped by the interpreter’s “horizon,” and that interpretation involves a fusion of horizons between past and present (Gadamer, 1960/2004). Applied to translation, this suggests that translators inevitably participate in constructing meaning by integrating their own historical, linguistic, and cultural perspectives.

The act of translation thus involves a circular process – often termed the “hermeneutic circle” – in which the translator moves continuously between parts and wholes: between individual lexical units and broader textual structures, between semantic content and stylistic intention, and between literal meaning and cultural significance. Ricoeur (2006) emphasizes that translation requires “linguistic hospitality,” a willingness to welcome the foreign while re-articulating it within one’s own language. This hospitality is not passive; it demands creative



interpretation, ethical responsibility, and intellectual humility. The translator must neither domesticate the text to the point of cultural erasure nor exoticize it through excessive foreignization.

One of the central hermeneutic challenges in translation is the polysemy of language. Words do not correspond one-to-one across languages; they carry connotations, emotional resonances, cultural references, and intertextual associations. Hermeneutic translation requires sensitivity to these layers of meaning. For instance, literary metaphors evoke imagery shaped by cultural traditions; religious vocabulary contains centuries of exegetical interpretation; political discourse is embedded in ideological frameworks. Translating such texts involves understanding their semantic fields and reconstructing equivalent interpretive possibilities in the target language.

Modern scholarship also highlights that hermeneutics in translation is not limited to literary texts. Technical, journalistic, and digital media translations also rely on interpretive competence. Even scientific terminology carries disciplinary and epistemological histories; legal translations demand recognition of institutional contexts; audiovisual translation requires decoding multimodal meaning (Chaume, 2020). Thus, hermeneutic principles extend far beyond poetry or philosophy – they shape how translators approach any communicative event embedded in human experience.

A central issue in hermeneutic translation is the role of the translator's subjectivity. The translator's identity, ideology, cultural background, and ethical commitments inevitably influence interpretation. Venuti (2012) argues that translators invisibly shape the reception of foreign texts by choosing degrees of domestication or foreignization, while Berman (1985) critiques ethnocentric tendencies that distort original meaning. Hermeneutics acknowledges this subjectivity not as a flaw but as a condition of understanding. Translators interpret from within their own linguistic and cultural horizons, and the translated text is a site where these horizons interact with those of the original.

However, hermeneutic translation does not imply unlimited relativity. Fidelity remains a guiding principle, but fidelity in hermeneutic terms means responsibility to meaning rather than adherence to literal form. This requires what

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Steiner (1975) describes as “reciprocity,” an ethical exchange between source and target texts in which the translator must compensate for inevitable losses by restoring balance through stylistic, cultural, or interpretive equivalence. The aim is not perfect replication but meaningful correspondence.

Intercultural hermeneutics further deepens this discussion. As translation often occurs between communities with differing worldviews, it requires an understanding of cultural narratives, value systems, and symbolic structures. Translation becomes an act of intercultural mediation: the translator interprets not only linguistic signs but cultural meanings. Katan (2014) emphasizes that translators operate at three interpretive levels – textual, situational, and cultural – each requiring different degrees of hermeneutic awareness. For example, proverbs, humor, idioms, and culturally embedded metaphors demand contextualized interpretation rather than literal reproduction.

Recent developments in digital humanities and corpus linguistics have added new dimensions to hermeneutic translation. While computational tools can identify patterns, frequencies, and stylistic features, interpretation remains essential. No algorithm can fully grasp ambiguity, irony, or cultural nuance. Hermeneutic approaches remind scholars that translation technologies must be guided by human understanding, especially in sensitive domains such as historical texts, indigenous languages, or religious scriptures (O’Hagan, 2019). Even machine translation post-editing relies on the translator’s interpretive judgment.

The practice of hermeneutic translation also faces limitations. First, interpretation can become overly subjective if not grounded in empirical textual evidence. Second, translators may project contemporary values onto historical texts, creating anachronistic distortions. Third, cultural distance can complicate the fusion of horizons, especially when key concepts lack equivalents in the target culture. Yet these challenges do not diminish hermeneutics; rather, they highlight the need for methodological rigor, interdisciplinary knowledge, and cultural sensitivity.

Ultimately, hermeneutics positions translation as a dialogic encounter: a meeting between the familiar and the foreign, between historical context and contemporary understanding, between linguistic form and cultural meaning.



Through interpretation, translators do not merely transfer information – they re-enact the act of understanding itself. Translation thus becomes a humanistic discipline grounded in philosophy, ethics, and cultural analysis.

The hermeneutic perspective enriches translation studies by highlighting the complexities of meaning-making, the ethical dimensions of textual mediation, and the dynamic interplay of languages and cultures. Whether dealing with poetry, sacred texts, political discourse, or audiovisual media, translators engage in an interpretive process shaped by historical context, cultural knowledge, and personal experience. By reaffirming the translator's role as an interpreter, hermeneutics restores human agency to the heart of translation and underscores the creative, ethical, and intellectual dimensions of this ancient craft.

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