

TRANSLATION THEORIES EXPLAINED

# Deconstruction and Translation



Kathleen Davis

ROUTLEDGE



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## Translation Theories Explained

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*Translation Theories Explained* is a series designed to respond to the profound plurality of contemporary translation studies. There are many problems to be solved, many possible approaches that can be drawn from neighbouring disciplines, and several strong language-bound traditions plagued by the paradoxical fact that some of the key theoretical texts have yet to be translated.

Recognizing this plurality as both a strength and a potential shortcoming, the series provides a format where different approaches can be compared, their virtues assessed, and mutual blind spots overcome. Students and scholars may thus gain comprehensive awareness of the work being done beyond local or endemic frames.

Most volumes in the series place a general approach within its historical context, giving examples to illustrate the main ideas, summarizing the most significant debates and opening perspectives for future work. The authors have been selected not only because of their command of a particular approach but also in view of their openness to alternatives and their willingness to discuss criticisms. In every respect the emphasis is on explaining the essential points as clearly and as concisely as possible, using numerous examples and providing glossaries of the main technical terms.

The series should prove particularly useful to students dealing with translation theories for the first time, to teachers seeking to stimulate critical reflection, and to scholars looking for a succinct overview of the field's present and future.

Anthony Pym  
Series Editor

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# **Deconstruction and Translation**

**Kathleen Davis**

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*to my father*

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# Introduction

The title *Deconstruction and Translation* promises too much, yet I have been unable to narrow it, or even to qualify it with a subtitle. This difficulty ensues not so much from the breadth of these fields as from the thorough implication of deconstruction and translation in each other. Deconstruction cannot be said to apply only to particular issues of translation, such as the intractable problems of wordplay or ambiguity, any more than translation can be designated as just one of many discrete topics addressed by deconstruction. One argument of this book is that deconstruction and translation share the same stakes.

I have had to find ways, of course, to manage this unwieldy topic. One decision I have made in this regard is to focus mainly on the work of Jacques Derrida. Over the past four decades deconstruction has had many proponents, particularly in Europe and the United States, and their arguments have taken various, sometimes conflicting forms. These arguments are themselves interesting and it would even be worthwhile to examine them as a network of translations. However, I could not focus on the many facets of ‘deconstruction and translation’ and at the same time trace the relations between these various trajectories. The reader should thus bear in mind that this book discusses deconstruction primarily through close readings of texts by Derrida, who coined the term ‘deconstruction’ and who produced (and continues to produce) most of what have become its primary texts.

I have also narrowed my material by relying heavily, particularly in Section I, on Derrida’s early texts, which consistently address issues of signification. They do so, fortunately for this book, by working with texts already familiar to scholars of translation, such as Ferdinand de Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics* (1959), J. L. Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words* (1975), and Walter Benjamin’s ‘The Task of the Translator’ (1955/1969). The labels ‘early’ and ‘recent’ as applied to Derrida’s texts are only partially useful, however, and could even be misleading if taken to imply two homogeneous, static groups. As I use the term here, ‘early’ texts range from *De la Grammatologie* (1967) to the ‘Afterword’ of *Limited Inc.* (1988), and register the unfolding of Derrida’s thinking as well as his response to the reception of his work. This dynamic occurs, for instance, in the form of interviews, such as *Positions* (1972), invited lectures on particular topics, such as ‘Des Tours de Babel’ (1985), and reply to criticism, such as the exchange with John Searle in regard to speech act theory in *Limited Inc.* (1988). In his more ‘recent’ work, Derrida has turned to topics that engage questions of ethics, justice and responsibility. In Section II, and particularly in my last chapter, I draw increasingly upon these texts.

My third tactic for narrowing the scope of this book has been to curtail discussion of its implications for fields that are complexly related to both

deconstruction and translation, such as feminist theory and postcolonial theory. Obviously there can be no clear-cut boundaries between these fields of inquiry, and I do occasionally address the ways that the intersections of deconstruction and translation have been important to gender/sexuality studies, cultural studies, postcolonial studies, etc. However, a full examination of the complex interrelations of deconstruction, translation, and these many already intertwined endeavors would be a project of incalculable scope.

Consideration for my primary audience has of course been a determining factor of this book's scope and methodology. I have tried to keep the discussion accessible to those who have had minimal exposure to deconstruction, without implying that deconstruction is a 'theory' or an 'approach' that can be neatly explained. Derrida consistently works to expose the impossibility of separating theory from practice, or text from context. Readers will therefore find that they must work through the issues important to the topic of deconstruction and translation by working through readings of other texts – readings that are not, and do not claim to be, complete or exhaustive. Whenever possible, I include among these readings the work of translation scholars, both to help situate my discussion of deconstruction in the context of this field and to clarify the similarities and differences between deconstruction and ways of thinking about translation that are more familiar to this audience. Even though deconstruction engages and has influenced many disciplines, its philosophical orientation often leads to misunderstandings by scholars accustomed to a different framework and a different use of terms. To the degree that this difference poses a problem for translation studies, I hope this book serves as a 'translation'. Because the topic of deconstruction and translation also appeals to those with an interest in the broader field of literary criticism, and because there has not, to my knowledge, been a book-length treatment of it in English, I have kept this more general audience in mind as well. If occasional references to unfamiliar approaches to translation seem estranging to readers more accustomed to literary criticism, they should be aware that deconstruction itself is strange territory to many translation scholars. If this mutual estrangement could lead to more mutual interest I would be well pleased.

It is customary for books in this 'Translation Theories Explained' series to address the criticisms of the theory in question. Deconstruction, of course, cannot be considered a translation theory, but I have nonetheless attempted to honour the purpose of this practice by using the comparative method explained above. One often repeated criticism that should be addressed here, however, is that deconstruction is ahistorical: i.e., that it does not heed the specificities of historical context, but rather claims a suprahistorical status for its discussion of language and texts. I hope this book will make clear that such a claim runs contrary to every argument of deconstruction, which never lets go of the point that specificity of context is essential to the very existence