

An Interview with Juliane House

By SANJANA RAJAN

Prof. Juliane House (hereafter Prof. H) is a German linguist and a Translation Studies scholar. She is a Professor Emerita of Applied Linguistics at the University of Hamburg. She is the Director of the Doctoral Program of Language and Communication at Hellenic American University, Nashua, USA, and Athens, Greece. She is also a Professor at the HUN-REN Hungarian Research Centre for Linguistics. She served as the President of the International Association for Translation and Intercultural Communication from 2010 to 2016. Her research interests include Translation theory and practice, Contrastive Pragmatics, Discourse Analysis, Intercultural Communication, Misunderstanding in intercultural discourse, Politeness theories and English as a lingua franca. She has published widely in all these areas. Some of her ground-breaking works include: *Translation Quality Assessment: Past and Present* (Routledge, 2015), *Translation as Communication across Languages and Cultures* (Routledge, 2016), *Translation: The Basics* (Routledge, 2018) and *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics* (with Daniel Kadar, Cambridge University Press, 2021).

In this mail-based interview, Prof. House talks about her Translation Quality Assessment model, current advancements in translation, her journey, future works, and more.

Sanjana Rajan (SR): Your Translation Quality Assessment model serves as the ‘only fully worked out, research-based, theoretically informed and interdisciplinary conceived approach’. How do you think it holds up to present-day AI-based (NMT) models, where algorithms determine the adequacy of translation? If you were to include more parameters in your model today, what would they be?

Prof. H: My model will certainly hold up in the face of AI, and I do not think that algorithms will fully determine the adequacy of a translation. AI can help speed up the analysis of a source text and the ensuing comparison of source text and target text, and my model can conveniently be used with AI support.

SR: ‘An adequate translation is a pragmatically and semantically equivalent one’, which is achieved through a functional-pragmatic approach. Recent advancements in pragmatics and semantics suggest that meaning is more dynamic and not fixed or transferable in a way ‘equivalence’ implies. Does this new research challenge your model?

Prof. H: No, it does not! In a written text, meaning is always fixed through the immutable arrangement of words, phrases and sentences, and thus cannot ever be ‘dynamic’. Further, meaning can never be ‘transferred’ as your question implies. It can only be re-constituted in a new language and a new linguacultural context, as is made clear in Systemic Functional Theory – a theory underlying my work.

SR: Can’t we say in some contexts, written text is materially fixed, but meaning can be functionally dynamic? Meaning can be created through the reader’s interpretation and social conventions, as contributed through neologisms.

Prof. H: I disagree, language is conventional, and meaning can be supra-individually captured. Meaning does not originate in the minds of individuals; if it did, how would we be able to communicate?

SR: Supra-individual meaning is anchored within distinct cultural-linguistic systems. It can be tied to a particular cultural logic that might not exist elsewhere.

As the ‘generations’ change, words are gaining various connotations on a regular basis. Can these ‘Gen Z’ meanings be re-constituted?

Prof. H: I don’t think they should! Language always changes to suit the needs and preferences of each generation- this is natural and normal.

SR: Your model distinguishes between overt translation and covert translation. But when translating tribal literary texts, certain culturally significant elements—like cultural constructions or metaphors—have no equivalents in the target language. An overt translation might leave them opaque, while a covert translation risks erasing their meaning entirely. In such cases, how can your

Translation Quality Assessment model guide translators to produce an ‘acceptable’ adaptation without perpetuating cultural loss?

Prof. H: Definitely, I would favour an overt translation for such texts, and I would include various paratexts such as prefaces, postscripts and footnotes to explain the original cultural constructions and metaphors you mentioned. In this way, important cultural information will not be lost but rather conserved.

SR: There are people who favour footnotes as a useful tool, while others consider them a translator’s failing attempt to translate a difficult expression. Do you think footnotes can disrupt the flow of the text in literary translations or abruptly bring a reader to another level of reality?

Prof. H: How can a footnote disrupt the flow of the text, since it is not part of the text? Those who consider footnotes as a sign of the translator’s incompetence are wrong in my opinion, since there are, of course, expressions that are not fully translatable, and this needs explanation.

SR: Some say frequent footnotes disrupt the reader’s immersion in the story and overwhelm them with too much information.

Is transliteration with embedded or external explanation an effective technique, according to you?

Prof. H: Yes, it is.

SR: In today’s translator training programmes, students rely on AI-based translation tools that prioritise semantic accuracy over pragmatic meaning. How should institutions adapt the assessment models to distinguish between AI-assisted and human translations and their meta-critical decision-making?

Prof. H: I don’t think AI-based translation tools invariably prioritise semantic accuracy over pragmatic meaning. Surely, it all depends on the type of text we are looking at. Instructions for use need to be differently translated from literary texts or advertisements of various kinds. And why does one need to differentiate between AI and human translations at all?

SR: Isn't differentiating between AI and human translations essential in academic contexts in order to understand students' personal skills and approach to language and translation?

Prof. H: If we are talking about tests and competence measurements of students, you are right.

SR: What core components should be included in an effective assessment model for such tests and measurements?

Prof. H: My own assessment model is valid for this too.

SR: English as a *lingua franca* requires covert translation with a 'cultural filter' to adapt to a global audience. In a linguistically diverse post-colonial context like India, where English coexists with dominant local languages and hundreds of indigenous languages, how can cultural filtering be effectively implemented without losing significant elements when a text in a regional language is translated to English or vice versa? Should a multidirectional adaptation, like creating hybrid texts by combining English with an Indian language, be prioritised by translators?

Prof. H: One cannot say that "English as a *lingua franca* requires covert translation"! Texts require covert translation, not entire languages in use. In order to answer this question properly, we need concrete cases in order to decide whether overt or covert translation or some type of adaptation or a hybrid text is appropriate.

SR: For example, when translating oral folk tales with metaphors and ritual language to English, the Political speech of the PM with its tone, register and code-switching for international audiences, or maybe subtitling Bollywood dialogues with its humour, idioms and double entendre.

Prof. H: These would all need to be translated overtly.

SR: In the global rise of *culture-driven media* (K-pop lyrics, anime subtitles), translations intentionally retain source-language terms or cultural markers when targeting an international audience. Although the function of translating K-pop or anime remains the same, i.e., it is based on the need of the audience, it is particularly tied to the source language and culture. Thus, how can this translation be classified, which does not fully adhere to covert or overt translation?

Prof. H: I would say it is a case of overt translation with the original ‘shimmering through.’ In general, the decision whether to translate a text covertly or overtly depends on what one wants to achieve with a chosen translation type.

SR: In the context of increasing state-sponsored disinformation, how do you see the role of ethics in media translation evolving? Can deliberate manipulations in translated texts, particularly when ideological motives are at play, be effectively identified through translation quality assessment?

Prof. H: Yes, using my linguistics-based model certainly facilitates the identification of ideological skewing. I have, for instance, revealed certain ideological stances in my analysis of political texts such as Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* and its biased translation into German.

SR: Do you think the ethical framework of media translation should be reconceptualised in order to prevent using translation as a weapon or tool by the media to promote particular ideologies? Can this development redefine ethical boundaries in translation?

Prof. H: No, there are certain universal standards of ethics, such as the dignity of the human being.

SR: Translation is often used by the media as a powerful tool to manipulate the recipient’s perception during political and social conflicts. How do you view the use of covert strategies by media outlets to subtly reinforce dominant power narratives in times of conflict?

Prof. H: I think it is the duty of all ethically sensitive and responsible persons to make explicit and condemn subtle manoeuvrings by dominant powers to push through their own narratives and silence others’ voices.

SR: In today’s digital ecosystems, where audio-visual translation like fan-subbed anime and participatory culture like emojis increasingly replace or supplement words, how can translation strategies and assessments be applied to non-linguistic signs?

Prof. H: One would need different models to assess non-verbal and multimodal entities.

SR: Could you perhaps elaborate more specifically on the basic strategies these models should advocate in order to effectively translate audio-visual and non-linguistic signs?

Prof. H: On second thought, why would emojis and other non-linguistic phenomena need to be translated at all?

SR: The meanings intended by emojis are not universal, even when they look the same.

‘Emoji translation’ is something that has emerged as a trend in the new digital era. It is also used as a technique to engage youth in various topics.

Prof. H: I see, but I am a linguist and cannot offer a well-founded answer.

SR: Translation is an interdisciplinary field. Advancement in which field do you believe will radically reshape translation theory in the next decade?

Prof. H: Definitely in Neurolinguistics, AI and Systemic Functional Linguistics.

SR: Systemic Functional Linguistics is an English-based linguistic model. Can translation practices in Indian languages, with their diglossic diversity or syntactic flexibility, help further expand the concepts in SFL?

Prof. H: Definitely, that’s possible. I myself have used systemic functional categories with German texts, and at present, I am writing a translation book for Cambridge University Press together with a colleague who is a fluent speaker of Chinese, and we will see how my model and the categories provided in it work with a typologically distant language like Chinese.

SR: Recently, the 2025 Booker International prize-winning translation of a Kannada short story collection, ‘Heart Lamp’, was praised as a “translation with a texture”. It contained a multiplicity of Englishes. The translator calls it “translating with an accent”. ‘The English in the book is an English with a very deliberate Kannada hum to it. This reminds the reader that they are reading a work set in another culture.’ How do you view this ‘accented’ English?

Prof. H: Beautiful! This is a wonderful example of overt translation!

SR: Anglicisms are extensively used in languages, especially in sports terminology. Can a localised translation of these terms still preserve the semantic precision and original impact it has on the audience?

Prof. H: Anglicisms are also part and parcel of Air Traffic terminology. Here, nobody questioned their use as an ‘invasion’ of other languages, so why not leave certain terms untranslated also in international sports? It’s an important albeit limited register.

SR: With your extensive contribution to translation theory, which of your books do you recommend as the ideal starting point for students entering this field and why?

Prof. H: *Translation*. Oxford University Press, 2009. *Translation. The basics*. (2d edition) Routledge, 2024, *Linguistics for Translators*, Routledge, 2024 (with Ali Almann).

SR: Over the decades of your seminal work, how has the shifting landscape of translational studies shaped you? Can you reflect on your journey so far?

Prof. H: When I wrote my PhD dissertation at the University of Toronto in the late 1970s, translation studies hardly existed- with the notable exception of the very important pioneer work by Nida and Catford - both essentially language-based works. Since then, the field has – in my opinion-sadly moved away from linguistics, and even attacked linguistic studies of translation as completely old-fashioned, embracing more and more ideological, psychological, political, feminist, etc. aspects of translation - thus moving away from looking at translation as an operation on language. I myself have always insisted on the importance of linguistics for translation and have therefore recently (2024), together with Ali Almann, written a new textbook of translation prioritising linguistics as the single most relevant discipline for translation studies.

SR: Have you ever encountered Indian translation traditions or translators during your research?

Prof. H: Unfortunately, not, and I do feel rather ashamed about my ignorance in this respect. Maybe you can enlighten me?

SR: Translation Today features many articles that talk about Indian translation traditions. They are available on the website. In Indian traditions, many texts have been produced that can be termed as ‘translations’ since very early times.

Prof. H: Very good, thank you!

About the Interviews

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