An Interview with Jonathan Evans

By NIDHI J. MAKWANA

Jonathan Evans (hereafter **JE**) is a Translation Studies scholar whose work examines translation as a cultural, political, and aesthetic practice rather than a purely linguistic act. A Reader at the University of Glasgow since 2024 and previously a Senior Lecturer from 2020, Evans is trained as a comparatist with a broad research agenda spanning literature, film, comics, games, and fan media. His research centres on two key concerns: the political dimensions of how texts circulate across borders and shape identity, and the creative dimensions of overlooked practices of fan cultures, online media, and "non-canonical" forms of translation. His reflections help chart the course of Translation Studies, from its origins to its future directions.

Nidhi J. Makwana (hereafter **NJM**) is a doctoral scholar at Pandit Deendayal Energy University, Gandhinagar. Her research, titled "Translations within Satyagraha: A Critical Study of M. K. Gandhi as a Translator", investigates the intersection of South Asian intellectual history, Gandhian studies, and translation theory.

NJM: Dr Evans, your research profile is diverse and impressive, spanning culture, politics, and films to translation for social change. What inspired you to examine translation's role in social and political justice, as well as its meaning beyond traditional boundaries?

JE: Thank you for your kind words and for inviting me to do this interview.

I started working on literary translation and, in fact, my PhD supervision was split between a department of literature. However, my first permanent position was in a department of languages and area studies, where literature wasn't the central focus. As such, I had to develop research that fitted more clearly within that department, which meant thinking about how translation might be relevant for area studies. The obvious way that was the case was to think about translation politically. To me, literary translation offers exciting ways to disrupt literary analysis, complicating the study of film and

media. But a lot of the discourse around literary translation in the early 2010s would keep coming back to the sort of binaries that I found very limiting, but which have been a staple of European discourse on translation since the Romans (i.e. free/literal).

I wanted to move away from these and other limitations I felt in Translation Studies at the time, which is why I started writing about film. The collective authorship of film complicated ideas about authorship in productive ways, and there wasn't such a long history of people writing and thinking about the translation of film (though people have, of course been doing that for over 100 years, too). I also felt that it would be useful for students to think about translation beyond written texts, considering a more multimodal framework of analysis.

In brief, my interest and curiosity in these topics were strong, combined with some frustration with the work I observed in Translation Studies. Additionally, a few chance collaborations encouraged me to think beyond my individual efforts.

NJM: Translation Studies has become increasingly interdisciplinary, integrating with fields like media studies and cultural studies, as evident in your work on film translation and intermediality. How has this evolution shaped the development of Translation Studies over time, and what interdisciplinary approach would you advise for translators to connect Translation Studies with other disciplines? Should this approach be driven by personal creativity or political objectives?

JE: I think how people work on translation comes from their wider interests. My undergraduate degree was in comparative literature, and that has always influenced how I approach texts. I've also always been interested in cultural studies as an approach, which, to some extent, leads to film and media studies. In the early days of the discipline, people from various disciplines were bringing their questions and ways of working into Translation Studies. Somebody trained in applied linguistics will ask different questions and use different methods than someone working in comparative literature, for instance. I think that at various times, Translation Studies have renewed its focus by incorporating new ideas from elsewhere.

If someone working on translation wants to talk to other disciplines, then I think you have to ask, "Why is this interesting to them?" This is something I learned from my own practice and from discussions with other scholars. I have got a lot of mileage out of thinking, "Well, what would that look like to someone in media studies?" Or literary studies, or film studies. I think it's essential to try to talk to other disciplines, especially as a lot of other disciplines don't really know what Translation Studies is or does. (My colleague Susan Bassnett has proposed this as an 'outward turn') I've been trying, sometimes successfully, to publish outside Translation Studies for the last 10 years or so, and you constantly raise the question of how to convince these readers that translation is worth writing about.

NJM: Interesting, in your work on migration and translation, you illustrate how cross-cultural communication creates a layered network of regional and foreign languages, and you also contend that translation both crosses and reinforces borders, not only geographical but also cultural, linguistic, and symbolic. How do you perceive translation functioning within migration as both a bridge and a border-making practice that actively reshapes these intangible boundaries in intercultural communication?

JE: I probably think about this differently now that I live in Scotland and not England, as I'm very much more aware of my own linguistic differences whenever I speak. Translation obviously creates bridges by allowing people to access information and services, which are essential for inclusion and can be very practical, such as using a doctor's services or other services. Yet it also becomes a barrier in a less obvious way. As soon as you need to use translations, you're marked as not speaking the same language, which can make groups feel excluded. It's a double-edged sword: the very thing designed for inclusion can also serve to exclude. But we tend to focus on the positive side of it.

This tension is extreme in places with a single hegemonic language, such as English in the UK, where a tendency toward monolingualism persists despite everyday multilingual realities. Even in multilingual contexts, translation can't include all languages, so some degree of exclusion always remains.

NJM: Retranslation requires a critical reading of both the source and earlier translations. How do you view the dual focus that influences the creative freedom of translation for retranslation? Does it expand opportunities by showing different approaches or limit the process by tying the translator too tightly to existing versions?

JE: I think it depends on how the translator approaches it. In my experience, knowing that there's an existing translation can be very freeing, as you can see solutions you don't want to use and there's a version to kick against, as it were. In practice, it doesn't tie translators to existing versions; the variety of *Madame Bovary* translations shows that, as do Pevear and Volokhonsky's retranslations of Dostoevsky.

When a writer has been translated many times, as with Baudelaire, the translator has no obligation to make the text accessible and can work more personally and interpretively. By contrast, translating a writer for the first time demands greater accuracy, as it serves as a springboard for future readings. Most retranslators work somewhere in between, seeking accuracy through their own reading of both the source and earlier versions. That dual reading is crucial for activating creativity, as you can't simply repeat what's been done, as you must know why you're doing it differently.

NJM: You distinguish between two types of rewriting, which ultimately converge in Davis's rewriting of Proust as a novelist and as a translator. Do you think her fiction teaches us something about how she translates, and vice versa? Also, how do you see self-translation? Is it a form of interpretative rewriting?

JE: There's a lot in this question. The simple answer about Lydia Davis is that I see her translation and writing as a continuum, with each informing the other. As a reader, I found her translations interact with her stories in many subtle ways. I'm not sure this is the case for all writers who translate, but it's very tempting to think that it would be so.

Self-translation is a different question. It's not something I've studied closely, though it's more common in multilingual or diasporic contexts. There's a spectrum of how writers approach it: some see it as a necessary evil to reach broader audiences, while others see it as an opportunity to develop and revise their work.

Samuel Beckett, for instance, made notable changes when translating his own texts. Since I view all translation as interpretative rewriting, self-translation, too, is necessarily a form of interpretative rewriting.

NJM: Furthermore, you propose using retranslation as a form of critical practice to link theory and practice in the classroom. Can teaching retranslation help future translators see themselves not only as service providers but also as critical interpreters of culture and discourse? Reshaping their technical skills alongside cultural and ideological aspects.

JE: Retranslation gives you a chance to move away from existing translations and to think critically about your choices: why you use a particular solution, how it differs from others, and what it allows you to do. It encourages you to become a more reflective practitioner, which is valuable not only for professional practice but also for developing as a critical interpreter of culture and discourse.

NJM: You describe film remakes as the 'black sheep' of Translation Studies and even as a form of cultural cannibalism. Why do you think remakes have been marginalised in translation research, and how does the cannibalism metaphor help us grasp the politics of remaking across world cinema? At the same time, since remakes often generate significant economic benefits for film industries, how should we rethink their role as cultural and translational practices shaped as much by power and profit as by aesthetics?

JE: Remakes have been marginalised in translation research because they're not easy to teach. Most classroom practices, like written translation or subtitling, require few resources. In contrast, filmmaking is complex and usually taught in different institutional settings. It's often taught in film schools, whereas translation is often taught in modern languages departments.

I borrowed the term *cannibalism* from Brazilian theorist Haroldo de Campos, who used it as a postcolonial metaphor for translation, suggesting that consuming and reworking another's work can be both an act of respect and appropriation. While the metaphor can sound negative, it captures the tension between homage and appropriation in film remakes, reflecting the complex ways narratives circulate and are re-appropriated for different locales.

You can't really separate remakes from their commercial dimension. Film is almost always a commercial medium, but it is also a literary text, which adds layers of complexity to its analysis. The circulation and reworking of texts, whether in film or literature, are deeply tied to economic and policy structures; translation and remaking are shaped as much by profit and power as by artistic intent.

NJM: One of the interesting yet debated aspects of fan translation is its originality and validity, as the motivation behind such translations is to create and expand their desire to contribute to the narrative. In such a case, do these translations have a claim to fan patronage? If yes, have you seen any instances where fan translations were later recognised and published with official publishers?

JE: There is a long history of people doing translations on spec (that is, without a publisher in mind or a contract) that would fit into the idea of 'fan translation', and in that case, there have been quite a few translations that started as passion or fan projects that have been officially published. I think there's definitely some fan-translated *danmei* (Boys' Love) novels that have been published this way. Potentially, Viki, as a platform, uses fan translations of East Asian TV, but I don't know if contributors have gone on to become professional translators. A lot of the discussion of this tends to rely on anecdotes, and there's potential for a more systematic, large-scale study of what happens to fan translators: do they go on to become professionals? A few people have suggested that idea, but I haven't seen any systematic studies of their destinations.

NJM: One of the most intriguing aspects of your writing is the broad category of non-professional subtitling, which includes fan-subbing, activist subtitling, and volunteer subtitling. Do you believe that the boundary between fandom and activism is becoming increasingly indistinct in subtitling practices? Some argue that activist subtitling gives a voice to marginalised groups, while others warn that it might reproduce stereotypes to appeal to a global audience. Where do you see subtitling fitting within this tension between resistance and complicity?

JE: I really dislike the term *'non-professional'*. It's often used in Translation Studies to contrast with professional translation. There are writers like Saikat Majumdar (2024) and Joanna Walsh (2025) who have recently reclaimed *'amateur'*, in many ways, from how people engage with and produce texts for the internet. There was a backlash against amateurism in the 2000s, including by writers such as Andrew Keen (2007). But perhaps, following Majumdar and Walsh, it's a better term for Translation Studies, too.

There is some overlap between fandom and activism, both in aesthetic or cultural activism, where fans push publishers or distributors to influence decision-making, as Henry Jenkins noted in *Textual Poachers* (1992). The example of negative activism, or *anti-fandom*, was seen in reactions to the 2016 *Ghostbusters* film, which was essentially removed from canon by fans. There are political forms of activism linked to fandom, such as the Harry Potter Alliance, and the LGBTQIA+ fans, Ting Guo, which I have studied. Early cultural studies, such as Hall and Jefferson's *Resistance through Rituals* (1975) and Hebdige's *Subculture* (1979), already saw political potential in the groups and practices. So, the boundaries between fandom and activism have always been porous and unclear. Any form of text distribution risks misrepresenting its source or perpetuating stereotypes, and activist subtitling is no different.

NJM: If we see subtitling as activism, should Translation Studies reposition subtitlers as cultural agents with political influence rather than invisible technicians? How do you see the rise of AI-driven subtitling tools changing the scope for activist subtitling? Could automation undermine the political edge of volunteer-driven communities?

JE: If we see translation as an interpretative, creative act, that applies to subtitling too, bringing with it the idea of agency in both the creative and the political. There remains a tendency to assume that translation is transparent, though since the 1970s literary translators have gained more recognition as creative professionals. However, subtitlers remain largely invisible; few are ever named, except for Darcy Paquet, who translated many Korean films. There

is greater complexity in subtitling and its central role in global media circulation. My discussion with Jan Pedersen in Sweden revealed that they're developing awards for subtitlers to promote visibility.

Your question about AI reflects many concerns I've heard from professional communities and my students. While machine translation and genAI make subtitling easier, AI often produces translations that lack nuance or political context, especially for minority communities. It also reproduces bias. Fan groups may use AI but still edit outputs to reflect their preferences, much as they already retranslate works when dissatisfied with earlier versions.

NJM: The 'Korean Wave' has become a global phenomenon, and its translation into English dubbing and subtitling often influences its spread; but subtitles do more than translate words; they also convey cultural references, humour, and social norms. Would you say the global circulation of Korean media through English subtitles risks flattening cultural nuance, or does it create new hybrid forms of cultural understanding?

JE: The growing global visibility of Korean culture is, overall, a positive development. While there's always a risk of stereotyping, it's better for Korean culture to circulate than remain unseen. What's particularly interesting is how many fans have learned about Korea and even the Korean language to deepen their understanding, much like earlier audiences did with Japanese culture in the 1990s.

In the Anglosphere, any engagement with works from other languages is worth celebrating, since it's so easy to consume only English media. However, audiences who access only selective parts of Korean culture may develop a limited view of it, though that's true of all cultures in global circulation.

NJM: Additionally, have you examined the Korean media scene in the UK and South Korea's reception of foreign media? What does translation reveal about this two-way dynamic of global media exchange, and do you think translation influences these asymmetries of power in media flows?

JE: The media asymmetries largely reflect preexisting national and linguistic power dynamics. English-language media naturally flows into South Korea due to both historical influence and the

global dominance of English, while Korean media remains more locally confined and across the diaspora. What's remarkable is how South Korea has successfully globalised its culture, especially through film, TV, and music, through strategic promotion and changing distribution models. The internet has made Korean media far more accessible worldwide, even though cinema still relies on more traditional, physical distribution through festivals and screenings. Translation, in this context, is secondary to these political and infrastructural dynamics. Audiences may tolerate imperfect translations to gain access, but access itself remains the more decisive factor in shaping global media flows.

NJM: In your essay with Ting Guo, you demonstrate how translation circulates queer Asian TV globally and, in the process, reshapes both 'queer' and 'Asian' identities. Building on Evren Savcı's idea of translation as a queer methodology, could you elaborate on how translation unsettles identity categories and how heteronormative stereotypes circulating through subtitles and remixes might contribute to fixing or shifting those identities into clearer, more digestible forms? And how translation unsettles not only linguistic norms but also heteronormative structures of media circulation?

JE: Building on Savcı, translation exposes the instability of meaning and the negotiations that occur when concepts like queer travel across languages and contexts. It reveals that identity categories are not fixed but contingent and culturally specific. The difficulty of translating queer itself shows how meanings tied to the Anglophone situation often resist direct transfer into other linguistic worlds.

Translation can thus unpick identity categories by showing that they can always be otherwise. Yet, as with other forms of mediation, it's double-edged: while it can challenge heteronormative structures by circulating alternative gendered and sexual identities, it can also reinforce them when certain narratives are privileged over others.

NJM: In the *Routledge Handbook of Translation and Politics*, you describe translation as a constant presence in political life, sometimes making information accessible and shaping identities, but also excluding or censoring. Why do you think the political

dimensions of translation have remained a kind of 'secret history' in Translation Studies, and how might making them more visible transform the discipline? What do you think are the most urgent political questions for Translation Studies today?

JE: The invisibility of translators and the professional norm of neutrality have long kept the political dimensions of translation hidden. When translators are seen merely as technicians, their role in shaping or censoring meaning goes unnoticed. A more interpretative view, which considers translation as a creative and cultural act, reveals its potential as a political intervention. Interestingly, many key thinkers who foreground translation's political nature, such as Naoki Sakai, Lydia Liu, Tejaswini Niranjana, and Vicente Rafael, come from outside Translation Studies, suggesting that the field has been slow to embrace politics as central. While recent years have seen more engagement, there has been institutional and pedagogical resistance, and many prefer to avoid the risks of politicising translation.

Yet, considering translation politically makes it far more relevant across disciplines and to broader social debates. For me, that's the most urgent question today: how to acknowledge translation's political agency without alienating those still attached to its image of neutrality.

NJM: Throughout your work, a recurring theme of translation emerges that extends beyond simple interlingual practice, involving media studies, queer theory, film studies, and intercultural communication. How far can we broaden the idea of 'translation' before it becomes entirely metaphorical? Do you think Translation Studies should continue defending its boundaries as a discipline, or embrace this permeability as a strength?

JE: In my work, I usually focus on interlingual translation between two natural languages and often two cultures. Even in my writing on film remakes, I use that lens to keep translation anchored rather than purely metaphorical. However, there's a risk, I think, that if we extend the term to every form of mediation or exchange, it loses its specificity and becomes interchangeable with concepts like adaptation or migration.

That said, Translation Studies has long embraced permeability. Since the early 1990s, scholars such as Snell-Hornby, Pöchhacker, and Kaindl have described it as an *interdiscipline*. This openness is both invigorating and challenging: large conferences often feel diffuse, and I sometimes find more coherence presenting at literature or media events where the medium itself provides common ground. Lefevere warned in the 1990s that if Translation Studies absorbed every mode of rewriting, it might lose its disciplinary focus and its nuanced understanding of specific media or literary contexts.

Personally, I find this tension productive. I work in a School of Modern Languages and Cultures, which means engaging with colleagues whose research isn't translation-centred, so interdisciplinarity becomes a necessity. It encourages me to articulate translation in broader humanistic terms, which, in turn, shapes my own work. Ultimately, translation can and should be discussed alongside other forms of textual rewriting, as Lefevere argued. But once the object of study shifts to literature or film itself, we are doing Comparative Literature or Film Studies, not Translation Studies. The challenge and the strength lie in maintaining that boundary while letting ideas flow across it.

NJM: Lastly, the rise of AI and machine translation tools is reshaping the field. How do these technologies impact the translator's role in politically sensitive contexts? Where linguistic diversity and cultural nuance are paramount? What strategies can translators employ to maintain agency and ensure cultural and political sensitivity while collaborating with Machine translation?

JE: I'm struggling with this like everyone else. There's a tendency to treat machine translation as neutral, but, as Kate Crawford's Atlas of AI (2021) shows, it's anything but. Human review remains essential, yet the reviser's agency is often diminished compared to that of an end-to-end translator. The challenge ahead is how to preserve that agency. Interestingly, I see a broader cultural shift: many people are reclaiming analogue practices to regain control; students are handwriting notes again; readers are preferring print; and translators are avoiding digital platforms. Perhaps translation will follow this pattern. For some tasks, AI will suffice, but in politically or culturally sensitive

contexts, people will still want the assurance of human judgment. Literary, cultural, and confidential domains, such as medical or financial translation, will likely remain resistant to automation. Still, with technology evolving so rapidly, it's hard to predict where that balance will settle.

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Cite this Work:

Makwana, Nidhi J. (2025). An Interview with Jonathan Evans. *Translation Today, 19*(2), 148-160.
DOI: 10.46623/tt/2025.19.2.in2

Annotated Bibliography