

TRANSLATION IN THE DIGITAL ERA: QUO VADIS?

By

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Abstract

This paper interrogates the trajectory of translation in the digital era under the guiding question: Quo vadis? (“Where are we heading?”). Translation is here conceived in a broad sense, encompassing both the written (translation) and oral (interpretation) modes, and specifically interlingual transfer. The study underscores the indispensability of translation as the language of globalization, given the multiplicity of the world’s languages—about 7,000 globally, over 500 in Nigeria alone, and six designated as official languages of the United Nations. Drawing from empirical studies and illustrations across diplomacy, economics, religion, media, and technology, the paper highlights translation’s centrality to knowledge dissemination and intercultural communication. However, the advent of digital tools, Generative Artificial Intelligence Translation (GenAIT), and Neural Machine Translation (NMT) compels a rethinking of translation practice, pedagogy, and profession. The paper thus poses the question of direction—Quo vadis?—to critically assess the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) inherent in the ongoing digital turn. By situating translation within historical, theoretical, and contemporary frameworks, it charts possible pathways for sustaining relevance, quality, and human agency in an increasingly automated translation ecosystem.

Introduction

Translation, whether in its written or oral form, has always been central to human communication. In this paper, the concept is used generically to cover both translation and interpretation, with emphasis on interlingual translation—that is, the transfer of meaning from one language to another, as opposed to intralingual reformulations within the same language.

Does translation really matter? Absolutely! Translation matters. It matters because it serves as the language of globalization. Without translation, effective communication across cultures and nations would be impossible, resulting in what Bariki (2022) aptly describes as 'communication miscarriage'. There are approximately 7,000 languages spoken across the globe (Ethnologue, 2025), but only six are recognized as official languages of the United Nations (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish).

Nigeria itself mirrors this linguistic complexity, hosting more than 500 languages with Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo constitutionally recognized as national languages. Surrounded by Francophone countries such as Bénin, Cameroon, and Chad, Nigeria's political and economic role in Africa underscores the critical place of translation in diplomacy, trade, and regional development. It is worth mentioning that Nigeria plays major roles in key sub-regional and regional bodies such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU). This further reinforces the geopolitical, cultural, and economic need for translation in diplomacy, trade, and regional integration.

Translation is equally indispensable in diplomacy, immigration, economics, finance, religion, tourism, healthcare, literature, science, technology, mass media, and the movie industry. Translation is therefore more than a linguistic practice; it is a sociocultural, political, and economic necessity. Empirical evidence supports this indispensability. Afolabi (2018), for example, demonstrates that translation plays a critical role in diplomacy, immigration, and international trade. In the same vein, Ajiboye (2017) reports that Nollywood, Nigeria's film industry—ranked third globally after Hollywood and Bollywood—thrives through subtitling and dubbing. Similarly, translation intersects with religion, tourism, healthcare, literature, science, and mass media, underscoring its broad and enduring relevance.

Against this backdrop, the question *Quo vadis?* becomes pertinent. The Latin phrase, meaning 'Where are you heading to?', is often invoked to inquire about purpose and direction, encouraging reflection on choices and future trajectories. In the context of translation studies, the phrase serves as a lens through which to interrogate the digital transformation shaping the profession. Neural Machine Translation (NMT) and Generative Artificial Intelligence

Translation (GenAIT) present both unprecedented opportunities and critical challenges. The only constant in life is change—*tout change, tout évolue*—and translation is no exception. The digital turn, therefore, necessitates careful reflection on where the discipline and practice are heading in this era of disruptive technological innovation.

Conceptual Clarification

Two concepts are germane to our reflections in this paper: Translation and *Que vadis?*. Simply defined, translation is the art of transferring a message from one language to another, without altering the meaning. As already hinted, the term 'translation' in this discourse is used in a broad and generic sense. It encompasses both the written form, commonly referred to as translation, and the oral form, otherwise called interpretation. Importantly, the emphasis is on interlingual translation—the transfer of meaning from one language to another—as opposed to intralingual translation which involves reformulation within the same language (Jakobson, 1959).

Pronounced as [kʷo: 'wa:dis], *que vadis* is a Latin phrase meaning “Where are you heading to?”. When used idiomatically, in ordinary day-to-day language, the phrase is usually spoken or written to inquire about someone's purpose, ambitions, or decisions in a particular situation. It may also be employed to encourage introspection or to express surprise or confusion regarding someone's actions or decisions. In the context of this discourse, by asking the question *que vadis?*, we are attempting to inquire about the future of translation not only as a profession, but also as a field of study. *Quo vadis?* would therefore mean, in this digital era, “Where are we heading to? *Où allons-nous?* (in French). *Nibo la n lo?* (in Yoruba). *Kedu ebe anyi na-aga?* (in Igbo). *Ina zamuje?* (in Hausa). *إلى أين نحن ذاهبون؟* ('iilaa 'ayn nahn dhahibuna)? (in Arabic). And we believe this should be a matter of interest to all, translation scholars, students, service providers and users alike.

Theoretical Anchor

The theoretical framework guiding this study is socio-constructivism, a paradigm associated with Lev Vygotsky. Socio-constructivism posits that knowledge is constructed through social interaction and collaboration rather than in isolation. One of Vygotsky's key contributions is the concept of the

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which highlights the future-oriented and interactive nature of learning. By definition, ZPD emphasizes that at its very core, learning is a socially engaged activity (with active participants – teacher/learner/others) and a transition process.

Applied to translation studies, socio-constructivism provides a useful anchor for understanding how human translators adapt to evolving technological environments by collaborating not only with fellow humans but also with tools and machines. Translation is thus conceptualized as a socially engaged activity, dynamic, forward-looking, and deeply shaped by its interaction with digital tools.

Genesis of Translation: Where Are We Coming From?

The origin of translation can be traced metaphorically to the Tower of Babel narrative in Genesis 11:1–9. This account, though brief, explains the multiplicity of human languages as the outcome of divine judgment on human rebellion. From this perspective, translation emerges as a 'Babel solution' to bridge the linguistic divisions that characterize humanity (Answers in Genesis, 2025). Historically, translation practices can be observed in ancient civilizations including Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome, where translators served as mediators of culture, religion, and governance. The Bible, particularly through figures like St. Jerome, is another landmark in translation history. Jerome's Latin Vulgate translation became the authoritative text for centuries, symbolizing the centrality of translation to knowledge and religion.

Interestingly, what started as an accident has become a major incident engaging thousands of scholars and practitioners who make Translations studies or practice their means of livelihood over the years till today. In recognition of the undeniable importance of translation in human relations, on 24 May 2017, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the resolution 71/288 on the role of language professionals in connecting nations and fostering peace, understanding and development, and declared 30 September as International Translation Day.

Evolution and Development: How Far Have We Fared?

Translation has evolved significantly from its oral and manuscript-based origins. The discipline gained institutional recognition through James Holmes, whose 1972 seminal work established translation studies as an academic field. Technological innovations have also shaped the practice: from oral tradition and handwritten texts to the printing press, typewriters, and eventually digital platforms. The rise of Computer-Assisted Translation (CAT) tools and Translation Memory revolutionized professional practice. Machine Translation (MT), conceived in the post-World War II era, developed from rule-based systems to statistical models, and more recently, Neural Machine Translation (NMT). The introduction of tools like Google Translate in 2006 and the subsequent integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) platforms such as ChatGPT in 2022 represent milestones that have redefined translation processes.

The Status Quo: Where Are We?

The present translation landscape is dominated by Artificial Intelligence and Neural Machine Translation. Large Language Models (LLMs) drive the efficiency of current systems, providing real-time translations in multiple languages. Yet, these tools exhibit limitations, including hallucinations, lack of contextual nuance, and ethical concerns around confidentiality. The metaphor of 'the hand of Esau, the voice of Jacob' aptly captures the dual nature of AI in translation: a powerful servant but potentially a dangerous master. Translation in 2025 is therefore characterized by paradox—simultaneously indispensable and destabilizing.

SWOT Analysis of Neural Machine Translation and AI Translation

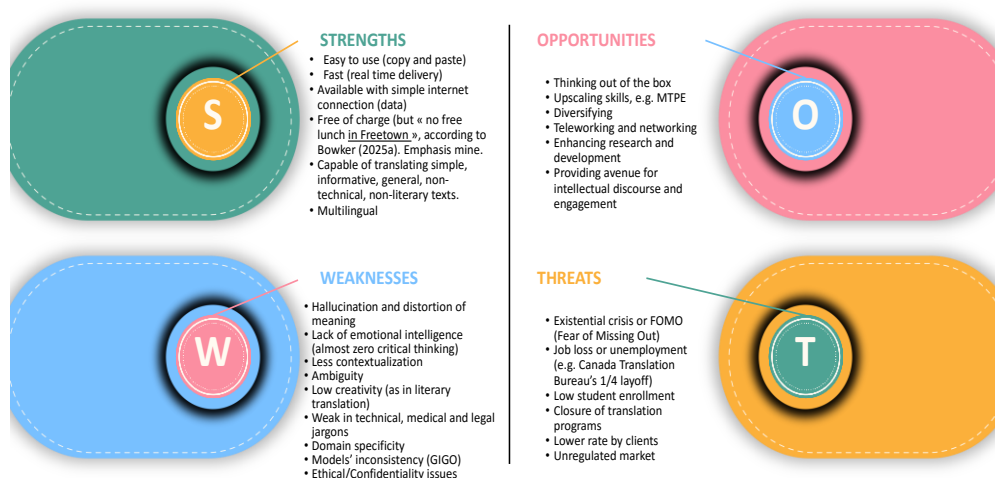
SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis is a procedure generally followed in management to assess a project, system or process either before or after its implementation. As applied in this case, a SWOT analysis of Neural Machine Translation (NMT) and Artificial Intelligence Translation (AIT) provides insights into their implications for the translation profession (see Figure 1 below).

Strengths include accessibility, speed, cost-effectiveness, and multilingual capacity. Weaknesses involve hallucination, ambiguity, low creativity, and

weak handling of technical jargons. Opportunities emerge in areas such as Machine Translation Post-Editing (MTPE), teleworking, and intellectual discourse (research). Threats, however, are significant: possible job loss, reduced student enrollment, closure of translation programs, and unregulated markets. The outcome of our SWOT analysis thus underscores the urgent need for translators to reposition themselves in this evolving ecosystem.

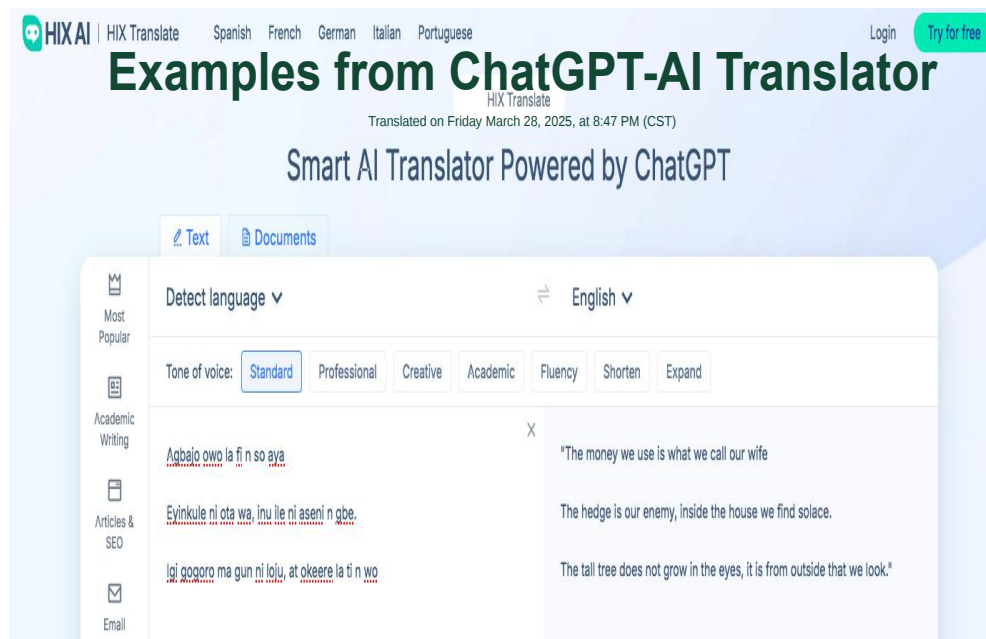
Figure 1: SWOT analysis of NMT and AI Translation

SWOT analysis of NMT/AIT



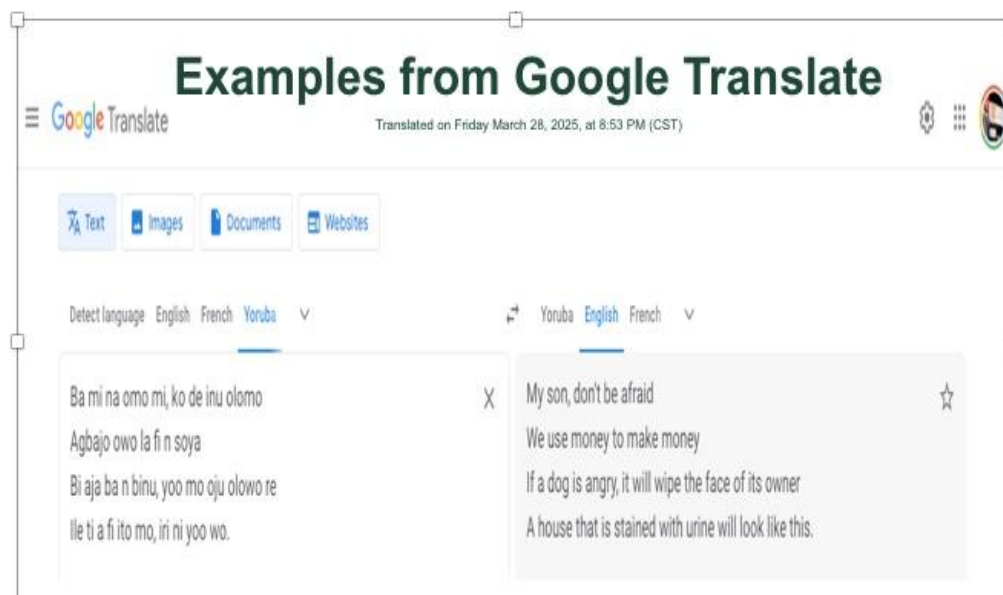
More specifically, to demonstrate some of the weaknesses of NMT and AIT, we carried out an empirical test with some proverbs and expressions as shown in Figures 2, 3 and 4.

Figure 2: Examples of ChatGPT-AI Translation's weaknesses



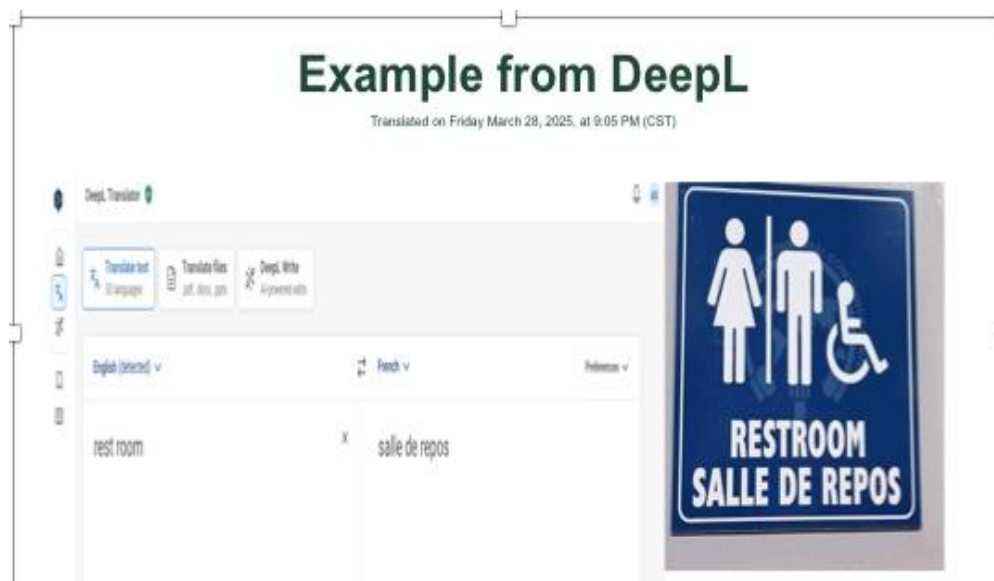
From the examples in Figure 2, it is obvious that ChatGPT-AI translation is incapable of translating proverbs accurately. “Agbajo owo la fi n so aya”, a Yoruba proverb was wrongly translated as “The money we use is what we call wife” which makes no sense compared with the source language text, which could easily be translated as “United, we stand”. Similarly, “Eyinkule ni ota wa, inu ile ni aseni n gbe” was wrongly translated as “The hedge is our enemy, inside the house we find solace”. The correct English equivalent of that Yoruba proverb would be “A man’s enemies are those of his household”. The third proverb “Igi gogoro ma gun ni loju, ati okeere la ti n wo” rendered as “The tall tree does not grow in the eyes is obviously incorrect. A better translation would be “To be forewarned is to be forearmed”.

Figure 3: Examples of Google Translation's weaknesses



Here, Google Translate shows weaknesses in the ability to translate culturally sensitive messages such as proverbs. “Ba mi na omo mi, ko de inu olomo” was translated as “My son, don’t be afraid” which has absolutely nothing to do with the message in the source language. The correct translation would be “Train my child but don’t kill him”. As for the translation of “Agbajo owo la fi n soya” as “We use money to make money”, that is another big and laughable error. Also, in translating “Bi aja ba n binu, yoo mo oju olowo re” as “If a dog is angry, it will wipe the face of his owner” instead of “A mad dog minds his owner”, the entire meaning of the message is thwarted. The fourth example, “Ile ti a fi ito mo, iri ni yoo wo” was also mistranslated by Google Translate as “A house that is stained with urine will look like this”, instead of “Ill-gotten wealth does not last long”.

Figure 4: Example of DeepL Translation's weakness



The only example here is “rest room” translated as “salle de repos” in French. “Salle de repos” in French literally means a room where one can go and rest” whereas the correct translation would have been “Toilettes”. In a nutshell, we have shared the examples above to show that though machine translation has its advantages in terms of speed, cheapness, etc., its weakness in terms of lack of accuracy and misinformation is highly overwhelming and risky.

Quo Vadis?: Where Are We Heading To?

Once again, the Latin phrase *Quo vadis?* literally asks 'Where are you heading to?' In the context of translation studies, it captures the uncertainty and hope surrounding the profession's future.

Scholars such as Cronin have already posed provocative questions in this regard:

Is there a future for translators? In the age of Google Translate, is the human translator condemned to large-scale extinction, or to the quaint peripherality of the Sunday hobbyist? The demand for translation keeps growing apace in the contemporary world, but will humans

continue to be asked to service this need, or will it be our machines that will do the bidding? (Cronin, 2013)

Where are we heading to? Will human translators face extinction in the era of AI, or will they adapt to remain indispensable? Evidence suggests a dual reality. Therefore, our modest answer to these poignant questions will be YES and NO. On one hand, machine translation dominates low-stakes contexts such as casual online communication. “A 2022 survey of 1,200 people found that they mostly used machine translation in low-stakes settings, like understanding online content outside of work or study. Only about 2% of respondents’ translations involved higher stakes settings, including interacting with healthcare workers or police”. (Lopez, 2025) Emphasis mine. On the other hand, high-stakes contexts involving law, healthcare, and diplomacy continue to rely heavily on human expertise.

By and large, it goes without saying that the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) is real and therefore calls for a paradigm shift in the works and lifestyle of a professional translator, lest he is easily replaced. Again, it’s AI O’clock. The future of translation, therefore, is neither absolute extinction nor unchallenged survival but adaptation through synergy with AI.

The Way Forward - Recommendations

The future of translation requires deliberate strategies to safeguard its relevance. In order to achieve this, we hereby proffer the following actionable recommendations.

- i. Sensitization about the responsible use of machine translation or machine translation literacy (Bowker, 2025b); through public lectures, conferences, scholarly publications, position papers, advocacy, lobbying, etc. When the use of a thing is not well known, its abuse is inevitable.
- ii. Adoption of human translation and machine translation combo, that is Human-Aided Machine Translation (HAMT) for pre-editing, post-editing and quality control purposes.
- iii. Institutionalisation of Translation Studies (TS) in Nigeria through the creation of more Translation and Interpretation training programs,

departments, centers and institutes like Ilorin's ITA, and resuscitation of erstwhile programs such as the PGDT&I of French Village, Badagry, for training and retraining. Machine Translation still requires humans to produce the generated models, and handle pre-editing, post-editing, but they need to be trained.

- iv. Integration of translation technologies into training programs. This is a condition *sine qua non* to produce career-ready graduates. (See EMT, 2022; Bodart et al., 2024). Again, it's AI o'clock!

We live in an era defined by rapid technological advancements, shifting demographics, economic uncertainties and ethical dilemmas. [...] The Fourth Industrial Revolution is no longer a distant concept—it is shaping the world today. Artificial Intelligence (AI), automation, and robotics are rapidly transforming industries, redefining the nature of work, and forcing businesses and individuals to adapt at an unprecedented pace. (Ezekwesili, 2025)

- v. Augmentation of collaboration among translation scholars, practitioners and other stakeholders. There is a dire need for Town and Gown Coalition (TOGOCO) among institutions and organizations such as the Translation Studies Association of Nigeria (TSAN), Nigeria Institute of Translators and Interpreters (NITI), West African Institute of Translators and Interpreters (WAITI), Nigeria French Language Village (NFLV), Nigeria Arabic Language Village (NALV), National Institute of Nigerian Languages (NINLAN), Institute of Translation Arts (ITA-UNILORIN) and similar language-oriented institutions (in Nigeria and beyond) to work in synergy, in line with SDG 17. (See <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>)

Sustainable Development Goal 17, which reads “Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development”, recognizes multi-stakeholder partnerships as important vehicles for mobilizing and sharing knowledge, expertise, technologies and financial resources to support the achievement of the sustainable development goals in all countries, particularly developing countries. Goal 17 further seek to encourage and promote effective

public, public-private and civil society partnerships, building on the experience and resourcing strategies of partnerships. (Emphasis mine)

(<https://sdgs.un.org/topics/multi-stakeholder-partnerships>)

- vi. Standardization and regulation of the Nigerian translation market. There is an urgent need for the passage of the Nigeria Institute of Translators and Interpreters (NITI)'s pending bill at the National Assembly. This will make standardization and regulation of the Nigerian translation industry possible. There are so many untrained, unprofessional interlopers branding themselves as translators or interpreters and sabotaging the market for the few professionals. Translation is not for every Dick and Harry. *N'est pas traducteur qui veut* (Amosu, 2006).
- vii. Motivation for present and future translation students through scholarships and grants awards (as with STEM). To walk the talk in this vein, we are thrilled to announce the endowment of Dr. (Mrs.) Tope Afolabi Prize (100,000 naira annually) for the best graduating student in Translation (English/French) at UNILORIN. Tope Afolabi (née Oshodi) is an *alumna* and former faculty member of Unilorin.

Conclusion

Translation in the digital era is at once challenged and enriched by technology. While fears of obsolescence are real, opportunities abound for translators willing to adapt. As Lépine (2025) notes, there is still cause for optimism despite the apparent 'doom and gloom' of the profession. "It almost feels like sacrilege to dare to be optimistic as a translator in 2025. Yet in spite of the constant gloom and doom in our field, there is cause for hope." (Lépine, 2025).

In the same vein, Ezekwesili's opinion is noteworthy, "AI is not just a tool—it is a fundamental force reshaping jobs (**including translators**), economies, and societies. While it presents challenges, it also opens tremendous opportunities for nations (**translators**) that embrace digital transformation." (Ezekwesili, 2025) Emphasis mine.

In conclusion, it suffices to pontificate that AI will not replace all translators. AI will only replace translators who fail to embrace AI. The call, therefore, is for translators, interpreters, scholars and students to actively engage with AI, shape its responsible use, and secure translation's future in a rapidly evolving digital world.

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