

SPECIAL FEATURE: AI AND LITERARY TRANSLATION

WRITERS ON AI AND LITERARY TRANSLATION

# On being translated by machines

David Diop

In his book entitled *The Myth of Singularity: Do We Have Anything to Fear from Artificial Intelligence?*, Jean-Gabriel Ganascia<sup>1</sup>, chairman of the CNRS national ethics committee in France, concludes that there is no comparison between human and artificial intelligence. Ganascia refutes the arguments of the Cassandras who predict that machines will take control of humanity on an imminent doomsday, something he considers highly unlikely. In his opinion, “there is no direct link between the computing power of machines and their ability to simulate intelligence.” Or to put it another way, human intelligence has no equal. Machines can be deceptive, especially when it comes to translating everyday phrases from one language into another, as is the case with the applications on our mobile phones. So, while a machine can handle this kind of simple translation, the complexity of translating

a literary work is beyond its reach. As the poet Mallarmé wrote, poetry and literature do not generally use language as an instrument for simple communication, “as one might silently take or put a coin in someone else’s hand”<sup>2</sup>. The utilitarian “basic use of speech” can never be equated with the “essential” language of literature. Literature orchestrates surprises in language. The evocative power of banal words that readers don’t pay much attention to in their own everyday speech comes from their unheard-of arrangement never before expressed in the written word, which is thus able to reveal their innermost thoughts, feelings and sensations.

If there is one field in which artificial intelligence is doomed to be relegated far behind human intelligence, I believe it is literary translation. It goes without saying that machines have no thoughts

<sup>1</sup> Jean-Gabriel Ganascia, *Le mythe de la Singularité. Faut-il craindre l’intelligence artificielle?* Paris, Seuil, collection Points, 2019, p. 53.

<sup>2</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, “Avant-dire” for *Traité du Verbe* by René Ghil, 1886.





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**David Diop**  
**Photo: Eric Traversié**

of their own, no feelings or intimate sensations. They can only simulate them artificially, and therefore only produce bad literary translations.

**“To put it another way, human intelligence has no equal”**

In this respect, I consider particularly enlightening the words of Antoine Berman in *The Experience of the Foreign*: “A bad translation I call the translation which, generally under the guise of transmissibility, carries out a systematic negation of the strangeness of the foreign work<sup>3</sup>”. Since machines do not experience the psycho-sensory effects of the literary text they are decoding, and are content to seek only its ‘transmissibility’, they are incapable of translating into another language ‘the strangeness of the foreign work’, that is to say, its true beauty.

*Translated from the French by Penny Eades-Alvarez*

<sup>3</sup> Antoine Berman, *L'Épreuve de l'étranger : culture et traduction dans l'Allemagne romantique*. Paris, Gallimard, “Tel”, 1984, p. 17.