
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Book Review: Joss Moorkens, Andy Way, and Séamus Lankford. *Automating Translation*. London and New York: Routledge, 2025. 248 pp

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| ABSTRACT

Despite the utopian and dystopian visions of the translator's position in the light of AI, it would be no understatement to claim that the rapid integration of machine translation (MT) and generative artificial intelligence into the language industry, noted as "digital paradigm" (Gambier, 2016) or "technological turn" (Jiménez-Crespo, 2020), has irrevocably altered the landscape of translation practice, pedagogy, and research. Even in the 2016 Translation Technology Landscape Report, the Translation Automation User Society (TAUS) has predicted "fully automatic useful translation" during the next twenty years or so (Massardo, van der Meer & Khalilov, 2016). *Automating Translation*, authored by leading experts Joss Moorkens, Andy Way, and Séamus Lankford, arrives at a critical juncture to provide a comprehensive, balanced, and deeply insightful guide to these transformative technologies. Far from being a mere technical manual, this volume masterfully demystifies the core principles of neural machine translation (NMT) and large language models (LLMs) while embedding them within a robust sociotechnical and ethical framework. It successfully bridges the often-daunting gap between theoretical abstraction and practical application, empowering readers—from students to seasoned professionals—to not only understand but also critically engage with and even build contemporary translation systems.

| KEYWORDS

Joss Moorkens, Andy Way, Séamus Lankford, *Automating Translation*

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 20 March 2026

PUBLISHED: 11 April 2026

DOI: 10.32996/ijtis.2026.6.3.2

Despite the utopian and dystopian visions of the translator's position in the light of AI, it would be no understatement to claim that the rapid integration of machine translation (MT) and generative artificial intelligence into the language industry, noted as "digital paradigm" (Gambier, 2016) or "technological turn" (Jiménez-Crespo, 2020), has irrevocably altered the landscape of translation practice, pedagogy, and research. Even in the 2016 Translation Technology Landscape Report, the Translation Automation User Society (TAUS) has predicted "fully automatic useful translation" during the next twenty years or so (Massardo, van der Meer & Khalilov, 2016). *Automating Translation*, authored by leading experts Joss Moorkens, Andy Way, and Séamus Lankford, arrives at a critical juncture to provide a comprehensive, balanced, and deeply insightful guide to these transformative technologies. Far from being a mere technical manual, this volume masterfully demystifies the core principles of neural machine translation (NMT) and large language models (LLMs) while embedding them within a robust sociotechnical and ethical framework. It successfully bridges the often-daunting gap between theoretical abstraction and practical application, empowering readers—from students to seasoned professionals—to not only understand but also critically engage with and even build contemporary translation systems.

The book is meticulously structured to guide the reader from historical foundations to cutting-edge applications and future implications. The opening chapters lay essential groundwork. Chapter 1 provides a necessary historical perspective, tracing the evolution from early rule-based systems to statistical and neural paradigms. It effectively debunks the persistent myth of MT as a "solved problem", arguing that while progress has been monumental, human expertise remains indispensable for high-stakes,

nanced, and creative translation tasks. This historical lens frames the central thesis of the book: automation, though “a perceived threat” (Lambert, 2023), is a powerful tool for augmentation, not replacement.

Chapters 2 to 5 form the technical core of the volume. Chapter 2 delves into the lifeblood of modern MT: training data. It lucidly explains the types, sources (e.g., translation memories, parallel corpora like Europarl), and critical preprocessing steps (tokenization, cleaning, alignment). The discussion on data scarcity for low-resource languages highlights a persistent digital divide, a theme revisited later regarding ethics and equity. Chapter 3 expertly contextualizes MT within the translator’s primary ecosystem. It explains how CAT tools and TMs function not merely as productivity aids but as curated data reservoirs that can feed MT systems. The analysis of how generative AI (e.g., via GPT integrations) is being woven into these platforms is particularly timely, questioning the implications of using general-purpose LLMs for specialized translation tasks.

The heart of the technical explanation lies in Chapter 4, the authors achieve a remarkable feat: explaining the architecture of neural networks, the Transformer model, and key concepts like attention and beam search with remarkable clarity, avoiding excessive mathematical jargon. Diagrams like the simplified feed-forward network (Figure 4.1) and the explanation of the encoder-decoder structure make these complex ideas accessible. This chapter is crucial for understanding the “how” behind the fluency of modern MT outputs. Chapter 5 then addresses the critical question of “how good is it?”, it provides a balanced critique of both automatic evaluation metrics (AEMs, such as BLEU, TER, ChrF) and human evaluation methods, cautioning against over-reliance on single, flawed numerical scores and emphasizing the importance of task-based, context-aware assessment.

Chapters 6 and 7 transition from understanding to doing. Chapter 6 is a pragmatic guide for practitioners facing the central dilemma of adopting MT. It systematically compares options: using free online engines, outsourcing to vendors, or building custom systems. The overview of available toolkits (OpenNMT, Marian-NMT, FAIRSEQ) and platforms (ModernMT, OPUS-MT) is invaluable. Chapter 7 is the book’s hands-on zenith. It provides a step-by-step, practically oriented tutorial using Google Colab and the adaptNMT framework to train a Transformer-based NMT model from scratch. This chapter demystifies the model-building process, covering data preparation, subword modeling with SentencePiece, training, and evaluation. It embodies the book’s empowering philosophy, showing that building a functional, domain-specific MT system is within reach for those without extensive programming backgrounds.

The final chapters expand the scope to applied contexts and broader implications. Chapters 8 and 9 move beyond plain text. They explore the integration of MT into professional workflows like post-editing (MTPE) and the unique challenges of localizing software, websites, and audiovisual content. The discussion on “continuous localization” within agile development cycles underscores how automation is driven by demands for velocity and scale in the globalized digital economy.

Chapter 10 is a forward-looking analysis of the impact of generative AI. It explains how LLMs and MLLMs (like Facebook’s NLLB) differ from traditional NMT, particularly in their ability to perform “few-shot” or even “zero-shot” translation with minimal parallel data. The practical guide on fine-tuning custom GPTs for translation and the exploration of the adaptMLLM platform illustrate the rapidly evolving toolkit available to translators and developers. The authors cautiously posit that while MLLMs may dominate future infrastructure, they are not a panacea, and their deployment requires careful calibration.

The volume concludes with its most critical contribution. In Chapter 11, the authors synthesize technical knowledge with profound ethical and socioeconomic inquiry. They examine issues of data ownership, labor equity (e.g., the pressures of algorithmic management on translators), environmental sustainability (the carbon cost of training massive models), and the “ouroboros effect” of training AI on AI-generated content. This chapter forcefully argues that technological proficiency must be coupled with ethical responsibility, urging readers to consider for whom and to what end translation is automated.

The primary strength of *Automating Translation* lies in its dual audience appeal. For students and translation practitioners, it offers clear explanations, reflective tasks, and a practical pathway to hands-on experimentation. For researchers and industry stakeholders, it provides a sophisticated, up-to-date synthesis of the field, critical perspectives on evaluation and ethics, and insights into future trends like MLLMs.

A key thematic thread is the redefinition, not elimination, of human expertise. The authors consistently argue that automation elevates the translator’s role from manual text reproducer to strategic manager, post-editor, quality arbiter, and system curator, which is also heatedly discussed in the scholarship (Boukhaffa, 2025; Monzó-Nebot & Tasa-Fuster, 2025). This is evident in discussions on MTPE, the need for human evaluation to complement AEMs, and the irreplaceable value of human judgment for creative, culturally sensitive, or high-risk content.

The book’s sociotechnical lens is its most significant intellectual contribution. It refuses to treat technology in a vacuum. By weaving discussions of platform labor, data ethics, and environmental impact throughout—and culminating in Chapter 11—it

ensures the reader understands that translation automation is a profoundly human and political endeavor, with consequences for equity, access, and professional identity.

If there is a limitation, it is inherent to writing about a fast-moving field: some details on specific LLM capabilities or tools may evolve quickly. However, the book's focus on foundational principles, critical frameworks, and ethical considerations ensures its core insights will remain relevant.

In *Automating Translation*, Moorkens, Way, and Lankford have produced an essential, authoritative, and timely resource. It is more than a textbook; it is a critical compass for navigating the automated translation landscape. By equipping readers with both the technical knowledge to understand systems and the critical acuity to question their implications, the book fulfills its promise to empower. It convincingly argues that the future of translation lies not in a choice between human and machine, but in the thoughtful, ethical, and skilled integration of both. This volume is indispensable reading for anyone seeking to understand, shape, or thrive within the evolving world of translation technology.

Sponsoring Information

This research is supported by the Hunan Provincial Social Science Fund under the project "A Study on the English Translation and Dissemination History of the *Tao Te Ching* and the Philosophical Discourse of *Laozi* (24YBQ098)".

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