

ESSENCES AND TRANSLATIONS

ON BUDDHIST TEXTS

AND INSTRUMENTALISM



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This article examines the concept of, what Lawrence Venuti describes as, “instrumentalism” in the translation of Buddhist texts. This refers to the assumption that translation transfers or reproduces an underlying invariant meaning in a source text. By exploring the origins of this tendency in Western and Sinitic translation discourse, it assesses the extent to which it appears in popular Buddhist studies discourse on so-called “Buddhist Hybrid English,” and proposes a humanistic and hermeneutical alternative. It presents this alternative based on two arguments: Venuti’s suggestion that translation is a creative and interpretative act that constructs value in the target language, and the Buddhist philosophical argument, drawing on the apoha theory of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, which indicates that words do not possess fixed essences as instrumentalism assumes. The article concludes by proposing a vision for “radical translatability” and reflects on machine translation as a kind of reductio ad absurdum of the instrumentalist model.

MOST SCHOLARS involved in Buddhist studies are or have been involved in translation in some capacity. Consequently, most scholars of Buddhism are likely to understand what is meant when one says that translation is commentary, analytical interpretation, and a form of original work that takes serious thought and consideration, not mere derivation or conversion of one text into another. Consequently, it is lamentable that translation has largely been devalued in academic advancement, under-supported in publishing, and under-theorized in Buddhist studies. Translation, as the act that shapes which texts circulate, in whose rendering, and with what authority, should be taken more seriously as a discipline, both practically and theoretically.

Nascent steps have been initiated towards the development of a subfield of Buddhist translation studies; notably, the volume edited by Alice Collett, *Translating Buddhism: Historical and Contextual Perspectives*, represents a significant stride in

this direction.¹ Natalie Gummer's contribution to that volume, "Translating the Buddha's Body," contends that Mahāyāna sūtras, such as the *Suvarṇaprabhāṣottama* (*Sūtra of Utmost Golden Radiance*), challenge or surpass the conventional characterization of Buddhist scriptures as "repositories of doctrinal teachings," owing to their elaborate self-referentiality and compelling performative elements.² Rather, they are words with a materiality—sonorous and rhythmic, in a way that defies the expectations of contemporary readers who balk at their repetition—that can transform beings who hear them. Gummer advocates for a translation approach that prioritizes these performative and formal strategies, aiming to provoke "aesthetic shock" (*saṃvega*) in contemporary readers, rather than viewing these texts as static historical relics. By maintaining the rhythmic repetitions of the Sanskrit, she suggests we should endeavor to give readers the impression that the Buddha's "body of words" is present in the current moment of reading or recitation.³

In this manner, I contend that Gummer advocates for a humanistic and creative methodology of translation that refrains from perceiving the source text as merely a vessel of meaning to be mechanically transposed into another language. The latter approach is precisely what translation theorist Lawrence Venuti has identified as "instrumentalism": the conceptual framework positing that an "invariant" (such as a fixed form, meaning, or effect) can be directly conveyed from the source text to the target text.⁴ In this article, I concur with Venuti in contending that instrumentalism—across its theological (or Buddhological), literary-canonical, and philological manifestations—is methodologically unsound and pragmatically detrimental. Conversely, a humanistic, hermeneutically self-aware approach to translation, integrated with emic resources from Buddhist philosophy, would establish a more robust foundation for Buddhist translation, while offering a warm counterbalance to the mechanization and automation of translation.

Instrumentalism and its Variants

It will be useful, before proceeding, to clarify what is meant by instrumentalism, since the term is doing considerable work in the argument that follows. Venuti,

1. Alice Collett, ed., *Translating Buddhism: Historical and Contextual Perspective* (SUNY Press, 2021).

2. Natalie Gummer, "Translating the Buddha's Body," in *Translating Buddhism: Historical and Contextual Perspectives*, 49.

3. Gummer, "Translating the Buddha's Body," 54–56.

4. Which Venuti argues against most strongly in Lawrence Venuti, *Contra Instrumentalism: A Translation Polemic* (University of Nebraska Press, 2019). I am grateful to Dominik Wujastyk (University of Alberta) for introducing me to the work of Lawrence Venuti and its potential application to Indology and Buddhist Studies. In addition, my interest in translation theory was fostered by my doctoral supervisor at the University of Toronto, Christoph Emmrich, whose frequent translation group meetings always kept us thinking about new ways to think about the art of translation.

in *Contra Instrumentalism: A Translation Polemic*, defines instrumentalism as the view that translation “reproduce[s] or transfer[s] an invariant that is contained in or caused by the source text,” whether that invariant is conceived as a meaning, a form, or an effect on the reader.⁵ The instrumentalist translator is, on this account, a conduit; the translation is a vessel; and the invariant passes through unchanged, or ought to. Venuti’s critique, developed across his earlier works and crystallized in *Contra Instrumentalism* and a related 2023 essay, is that this model has dominated translation theory and practice for some two millennia, and that it grossly oversimplifies what translation actually is and does.⁶

I take instrumentalism, following Venuti’s analysis, to be a family of positions rather than a single doctrine. Its members share a core assumption, namely that there is *something* prior to the translation, *something* contained in or caused by the source, which the translation must preserve and may fail to do so. However, this *something* varies across different cases. Three variants are particularly relevant to the current discussion.

The first is theological instrumentalism. Here, the invariant is divinely or canonically authorised meaning, and mistranslation is a form of sacrilege. Jerome’s famous phrase, *non verbum e verbo, sed sensum exprimere de sensu*, “not word for word, but sense for sense,” is its locus classicus in the Western tradition.⁷ In prioritizing sense over word, Jerome assumes that content can be cleanly separated from lexical and grammatical structure, that the kernel can be extracted from the shell and transferred from the *Hebraica veritas* into Latin. The fear that animates translators in this register is the fear of mistranslating an invariant whose stakes are eschatological. As I shall argue below, Buddhist translation discourse in China, while differing from Christian translation discourse in significant ways, exhibits comparable anxieties about the integrity of the *buddhavacana* (the word of the Buddha).

The second variant is literary-canonical instrumentalism. Here, the invariant is the aesthetic or cultural essence of a canonical work, and the translation is at best an imperfect vehicle for accessing it. Venuti’s preferred example is John Keats’ sonnet “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer,” in which Keats reports breathing the “pure serene” of Homer for the first time upon reading Chapman’s Elizabethan English rendering.⁸ What Keats perceives as access to Homer is, Venuti argues, actually access to Chapman’s creative work, which has reconstructed Homer from

5. Venuti, *Contra Instrumentalism*, 1.

6. Lawrence Venuti, “On a Universal Tendency to Debase Retranslations; or, The Instrumentalism of a Translation Fixation,” *PMLA* 138, no. 3 (2023): 598–615.

7. Jerome, *Epistula 57, Ad Pammachium de optimo genere interpretandi*, 5. This, and the next five examples of instrumentalism in this paper, are examples frequently used in Venuti’s works.

8. Venuti, “On a Universal Tendency to Debase Retranslations,” 599–602.

scratch for an English audience using the metrical and lexical resources of Elizabethan poetry. The instrumentalist reading debases this creative achievement by viewing it as a transparent window onto a pre-existing Homeric essence. I shall suggest that analogous moves operate in Buddhist studies whenever an English translation is regarded as the definitive bearer of an original Sanskrit or Chinese essence.

The third variant, and the one most directly relevant to Buddhist studies as an academic discipline, is philological instrumentalism. Here, the invariant is the meaning recoverable by scholarly methods from a critically established text, and the translation is faithful insofar as it adheres to that recovered meaning. Philological instrumentalism is often presented as a rigorous alternative to the literary and theological variants, since it bases its claims about meaning on the apparatus of textual criticism rather than on revelation or aesthetic intuition. Yet, as I shall argue in due course, it shares the same fundamental assumption: that there is an invariant prior to the translation, awaiting recovery and transfer, whose existence the philologist's methods presuppose and whose authority underpins the translation's claim to correctness.

The aim of distinguishing these variants is not to suggest that they are identical in motivation, history, or institutional context. They clearly are not. Instead, the point is that they share a common fundamental assumption that translation is the transfer of something that exists prior to translation, and this shared assumption is what makes them part of a single family of positions, which Venuti refers to as instrumentalism.

The Untranslatability Trap

Before turning to Buddhist materials, it is worth examining two influential positions that may seem to provide escapes from instrumentalism but actually reinforce its core assumption. Both are discussed by Venuti, and a brief overview here serves to clarify what an actual departure from instrumentalism would entail.

Barbara Cassin's *Dictionary of Untranslatables* presents itself as a counter-history of philosophy, organized around the claim that the history of philosophy is a history of mistranslation due to the "untranslatability" of most of philosophy's key terms.⁹ One could argue, however, that what Cassin's dictionary actually documents is not untranslatability but ongoing retranslation: the same philosophical concepts being rendered, re-rendered, and debated across linguistic and historical contexts, resulting in not a uniform mistranslation but a productive diversity of

9. Barbara Cassin, ed., *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, trans. Steven Rendall et al. (Princeton University Press, 2014).

interpretive responses. Framing these responses as failed translations of an inaccessible original assumes that an original exists to which they are failing, which is to say it presupposes the very invariant whose existence one might have hoped a dictionary of untranslatables would challenge. Emily Apter's *Against World Literature* makes this assumption more explicit, arguing that certain terms are characterized by genuine incommensurability and, in some cases, ought not to be translated at all.¹⁰ But this, too, identifies an invariant; it simply renders it inaccessible. The position is structurally instrumentalist, differing from the dominant view only in its conclusions about what translation can accomplish.

A more radical departure is found in Willard Quine's thesis of the indeterminacy of translation, which argues that, because it is impossible to separate words or phrases from their social and behavioral contexts, there are no objectively valid translations.¹¹ This does not mean that translation is impossible; rather, according to Quine's view, it is multiply possible, since the impossibility lies not in the lack of correct translations but in the absence of any uniquely correct one. I invoke Quine here heuristically rather than as a foundational commitment, because the full philosophical weight of his behaviorist ontology would, if taken seriously, threaten the scholarly pursuit of philological interpretation itself, which is not my aim. What Quine usefully establishes for the present argument is that the instrumentalist ideal of a uniquely correct rendering is not a failed aspiration but a confused one. The impossibility of perfect transfer is not a limitation to be regretted; it is a revelation of what translation actually is.

Instrumentalism in Sinitic Buddhist Translation Theory

We shall now consider the historical body of evidence most directly relevant to the present argument, namely the discourse on translation that developed within the Chinese Buddhist tradition between the fourth and seventh centuries CE. The main source for this material in English is Martha P. Y. Cheung's *An Anthology of Chinese Discourse on Translation*, the first volume of which covers the period from earliest times through the Buddhist sūtra translation project and introduces into English a substantial body of Chinese reflection on translation that was previously inaccessible to non-readers of Chinese.¹² What this material shows is that anxieties about loss, fidelity, and the faithful conveyance of source meaning were recurrent concerns of Chinese Buddhist translators, and that these concerns have a recognizably

10. Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (Verso, 2013).

11. W. V. O. Quine, *Word and Object* (MIT Press, 1960), chapter 2.

12. Martha P. Y. Cheung, ed., *An Anthology of Chinese Discourse on Translation*, vol. 1, From Earliest Times to the Buddhist Project (St. Jerome Publishing, 2006).

instrumentalist structure, although the picture is more nuanced than a simple opposition between instrumentalist and non-instrumentalist positions.

A useful entry point is Zhi Qian (支謙, fl. 233–253 CE), whose preface to his translation of the *Dharmapāda* is often cited as containing the first piece of theoretical reflection on translation in the Chinese tradition. Zhi Qian articulates what would become a dominant theme in Chinese discourse on translation: the difficulty of the activity itself, given that the “terms used to denote things” differ markedly between source and target languages. The preface also records the famous exchange in which the presiding translator Vighna, citing the Buddha’s own words, insists that “one should follow the sense in all its plainness, dispense with embellishment (飾), and transmit the truth without being too strict (嚴) with the means and method,” a position which the assembly affirms by appeal to Laozi’s dictum that “beautiful (美) words are not trustworthy (信) and trustworthy words are not beautiful.”¹³ The exchange is significant because the very framing of the disagreement, namely, whether a translation should preserve “the sense” of the source faithfully or render it in elegant Chinese style, presupposes that there is a sense in the source that can be transferred more or less faithfully. The terms of the debate are instrumentalist, even when participants disagree about the appropriate translational strategy.

Dao An (道安, 312/314–385 CE) is the figure to whom the most influential early formulation belongs, namely the “five instances of losing the source” (五失本) and “three difficulties” (三不易), articulated in his preface to *A Collation of Extracts from the Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra* of around 382 CE.¹⁴ The five instances catalogue the ways in which translation from “Hu-language” (which denotes Central Asian languages and Prakrits) into Chinese inevitably loses some of the source: by reversing word order to conform to Chinese syntax, by transforming unhewn (質) style into refined (文) Chinese to suit the tastes of literate Chinese readers, by trimming and modifying the elaborate repetitive chants of the Hu-language sūtras, by erasing the verse *gāthās* that recapitulate prose passages, and by removing digressions that complete and return to a narrative theme. The three difficulties concern the unavoidable need to adapt antiquated material for contemporary readers, the gap between the wisdom of the enlightened and the understanding of ordinary readers, and the recklessness of modern editors in comparison with the meticulous care of the early arhats who compiled the canon. As Cheung notes in her commentary, Dao An’s remarks are best read not as a systematic theoretical statement but as observations whose value lies in his thorough study of existing sūtra translations.¹⁵ What is striking for the present argument, however, is the structure of the formulation.

13. Cheung, *Anthology*, 59.

14. Cheung, *Anthology*, 79–82.

15. Cheung, *Anthology*, 81–83.

To speak of losing the source is to presuppose that there is something in the source that translation is obligated to preserve and capable of failing to preserve. Loss is intelligible only against the assumption of an invariant whose features the translation is meant to reproduce. Dao An's framework is, in this respect, recognizably instrumentalist.

Sengrui (僧叡, 353?–420? CE), who served as Kumārajīva's principal disciple and the recorder of his Translation Assembly, took up Dao An's framework and applied it in his prefaces to Kumārajīva's translations. In his preface to the translation of the larger *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra* of around 404 CE, Sengrui records that, as he took up his pen to record Kumārajīva's oral translation, he could not forget his "late teacher's exhortations about the Five Losses and the Three Difficulties," and was "always fearful and under stress, making every step of the way with the utmost care."¹⁶ What Cheung's anthology shows is that Dao An's framework rapidly became a kind of nodal point around which subsequent discourse on translation revolved, with later translators either using it to inform their own practice (as Sengrui did) or appropriating it to defend their own translational choices. In either case, the assumption of a source whose features can be more or less preserved is taken for granted, and the disagreement concerns only the proper means of preservation.

Hui Yuan (慧遠, 334–416 CE) occupies a slightly different position. In his preface to a collation of extracts from the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra* of 411 CE, Hui Yuan reflects on the difficulty of mediating between unhewn (質) and refined (文) styles of translation, observing that "to render a sūtra that is unhewn into a translation that is refined is to provoke doubt and scepticism; and to render a sūtra that is refined into a translation that is unhewn is to invoke the displeasure of most readers."¹⁷ His position is that translation must be appropriate to the source, to the readership, and to the purpose for which the translation is intended. This is, in some respects, a more sophisticated and pragmatically attentive view than Dao An's, anticipating much later debates about formal and dynamic equivalence. Yet the underlying assumption remains instrumentalist, since the very notion that one might render the source faithfully or unfaithfully presupposes that there is something in the source whose faithfulness can be assessed.

The most intriguing figure in this tradition is Kumārajīva (鳩摩羅什, 344–409/413 CE). Records of Kumārajīva's views on translation are notably limited, despite his status as one of the most influential translators in the tradition's history, but one passage stands out. In his biography within Sengyou's *A Collection of Records on the Emanation of the Chinese Tripiṭaka*, Kumārajīva reflects on the loss of aesthetic and musical qualities when Indic sūtras are translated into Chinese, especially the

16. Cheung, *Anthology*, 96.

17. Cheung, *Anthology*, 108.

loss of the harmonies between words and music that characterise the *gāthās* of the source. He states: “But when the *Fàn* [Sanskrit] sūtras are translated into Chinese, the beauty of form and the colour and verve are lost. The meaning can generally be conveyed, but in a form very different from the original. It is like giving someone rice that you have chewed; he will find it not just tasteless, but downright disgusting.” Cheung notes that the deliberately emotive language Kumārajīva uses suggests that his concern is specifically with the aesthetic dimensions of the sūtras, particularly the *gāthās* that were customarily set to music, rather than with translation as such.¹⁸ What Kumārajīva registers, with unusual clarity for this tradition, is that form and meaning are not cleanly separable, and that a translation that captures only the propositional content while losing the aesthetic and performative dimensions produces something fundamentally different from its source. This, I would argue, is a practical anticipation of the position I have been defending in this paper, even though Kumārajīva does not develop it into an explicit theory. His translational practice tells a similar story. Despite his commitment to idiomatic rendering, he retains a great many Sanskrit transcriptions, and his texts remain unmistakably foreign even as they become accessible to Chinese readers. They become Chinese without ceasing to be foreign. This, I shall argue below, is a practical anticipation of what Venuti, working with very different sources, would later call foreignization.

Xuanzang (玄奘, 600–664 CE) provides the final figure in this overview, and one whose framework merits careful reinterpretation. Cheung records his “Five Guidelines for Not-translating a Term” (五不翻), not as a doctrine of untranslatability but as a set of conditions under which the appropriate translational response is transliteration rather than semantic rendering. The five categories are: terms that partake of the occult (such as *dhāraṇīs* and mantras); terms with multiple meanings (such as *bhagavat* 薄伽梵); terms for objects that do not exist in the receiving culture (such as the *jambu*-tree 閻浮樹); terms whose past rendering has become established (such as *anubodhi* 阿耨菩提); and terms whose source-language form elicits positive associations and gravity that a semantic translation would lose (such as *prajñā* 般若, which carries an “authority and weight” that the indigenous Chinese 智慧 for wisdom does not). Cheung’s commentary is particularly illuminating on this point. She notes that the character 翻 means not only “translate” but also “to turn (something upside down),” and asks whether, in the light of these guidelines, “translation, in order to be translation, must conceal even as it reveals,” that “it must remain, as it were, ‘unturned,’ ‘not-translated’ in some parts.”¹⁹ What Cheung suggests, and what I want to endorse, is that Xuanzang’s framework

18. Cheung, *Anthology*, 94.

19. Cheung, *Anthology*, 156–158.

documents not the existence of genuinely untranslatable items but the assimilation of foreign terms into the receiving language. Bodhi is not untranslated; it has become a Chinese word, 菩提 (in modern Mandarin, *pútí*), which a literate reader recognizes as Buddhist technical vocabulary, and which has subsequently entered the Japanese (*bodai*), Korean (*bori*), and Vietnamese (*bồ đề*) lexicons through the East Asian diffusion of Buddhism. The terms have been translated, but through foreignizing assimilation rather than domesticating substitution.

What this survey suggests is that the dominant theoretical voices of the Chinese Buddhist translation tradition operated within a framework whose structure is recognizably instrumentalist. Dao An's "five instances of losing the source" presupposes a source whose features can be preserved or lost; Sengrui inherits and amplifies the framework; Hui Yuan's more pragmatic position remains within its terms. Yet the tradition is not monolithic. Kumārajīva's brief but suggestive remarks about the loss of musical and formal qualities in translation register an awareness that form and meaning are not separable, and his practice exhibits a foreignizing tendency that resists the instrumentalist reduction of translation to the transfer of propositional content. Xuanzang's framework, read against the conventional grain, documents the productive assimilation of foreign terms into the receiving language. The tradition contains, in other words, resources for thinking beyond the instrumentalist framework, even where its dominant theoretical articulations operate within it. An anti-instrumentalist approach to Buddhist translation, of the kind I am proposing here, will find in Kumārajīva and Xuanzang precedents to be developed rather than departures from a tradition that must be wholly rejected.

What Kind of Object is a Mahāyāna Sūtra?

Turning from theoretical statements about translation to a prior question that bears directly on what translation of Buddhist texts can mean: what kind of object is a Mahāyāna sūtra in the first place? My contention is that an instrumentalist approach to Mahāyāna sūtra translation rests on a particular and contestable answer to this question, namely that sūtras are repositories of doctrinal content, and that recent scholarship, including my own prior work, has provided strong grounds for rejecting that answer.

Masahiro Shimoda's recent methodological work on the study of Mahāyāna sūtras offers a useful frame.²⁰ Shimoda distinguishes, following the linguistic turn in historiography articulated by Gareth Stedman Jones and others, between the *internal history* of a text, which concerns the elucidation of the discourses

20. Masahiro Shimoda, "Reconsidering the Methodologies for the Study of Mahāyāna Sūtras," in *The Buddha's Words and Their Interpretations* (The Shin Buddhist Comprehensive Research Institute, 2021), 1–18.

operating within it, and the *external history* of a text, which refers to the social and institutional milieu in which it emerged.²¹ Shimoda's diagnostic claim is that scholars of Mahāyāna Buddhism have systematically conflated this distinction, interpreting textual discourses as transparent reflections of external social realities, when in fact, as he argues with reference to Derrida and semiotic theories of written language, the sūtras construct their own internal world of legitimacy that is significantly autonomous from any external referent.²² The Mahāyāna sūtras, on Shimoda's account, leave "almost no historical traces left within their discourses," and the attempt to extract from them an account of the institutional or social settings of early Mahāyāna communities is methodologically compromised from the outset.²³ The sūtra came to be understood as the Buddha himself, present in the written text, accessible through copying, reciting, and venerating the scripture, and capable of being "encountered" inside the discourse in a manner that Shimoda likens, following Alan Cole, to the long-deferred reunion of a son with his father.²⁴ This is not a metaphor about doctrine; it is a description of what the sūtras claim to do, and what their compilers structured them to accomplish.

Shimoda's argument is primarily methodological, addressed to the question of how one ought to study Mahāyāna sūtras as historical objects. But it has, I would suggest, direct implications for translation. If the sūtras are objects whose textuality is constitutive of their religious efficacy, whose internal architecture, including their self-referential passages, repetitive entrustment formulae, and elaborate performative structures, is the locus of what they do as scriptures, then an instrumentalist translation that extracts doctrinal content and renders it in idiomatic target-language prose has produced something fundamentally different from the object it claims to translate. The same methodological error that Shimoda diagnoses in historical scholarship, namely the refusal to take the text's internal logic seriously and the tendency to read texts as transparent windows onto something external to them, is repeated at the level of translation practice when sūtras are rendered as if their content were separable from their discursive form.

Gummer's contribution to the Collett volume, to which I have already referred, develops this point with particular force in relation to translation.²⁵ Drawing on her broader argument that some Mahāyāna sūtras figure their own performance as a form of aesthetic and sacrificial ritual, Gummer suggests that the elaborate

21. Shimoda, "Reconsidering," 1–2; Gareth Stedman Jones, "The Determinist Fix: Some Obstacles to the Further Development of the Linguistic Approach to History in the 1990s," in *Practicing History: New Directions in Historical Writing after the Linguistic Turn*, ed. Gabrielle M. Spiegel (Routledge, 2005), 63.

22. Shimoda, "Reconsidering," 3–4.

23. Shimoda, "Reconsidering," 12.

24. Shimoda, "Reconsidering," 13; Alan Cole, *Text as Father: Paternal Seductions in Early Mahāyāna Buddhist Literature* (University of California Press, 2005).

25. Gummer, "Translating the Buddha's Body," 49–68.

repetitions, the catalogues of beings, the formulaic descriptions of cosmic settings, and the sustained self-referential passages are not packaging around a doctrinal core but constitute the very means by which the sūtra effects its claims.²⁶ To render such a text in a streamlined, doctrinally lucid English that trims the repetitions and condenses the formulae is not to produce a more readable translation of the same text; it is to produce a different kind of object, one that describes Buddhist ideas rather than enacting Buddhist scriptural performance.

My prior work on self-referential passages in Mahāyāna sūtra literature has argued that these passages, in which the text speaks of itself and prescribes its own use, are a structural feature of early Mahāyāna sūtra literature rather than an idiosyncrasy of a few outlying texts.²⁷ The *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* (*Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines*), the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* (*Lotus Sūtra*), the *Vajracchedikā* (*Diamond Sūtra*), and the *Suvarṇaprabhāsottama*, among others, contain substantial passages in which the text identifies itself with the Buddha, prescribes its own veneration, and articulates the merits of its copying, reciting, and propagation. These passages are not decorative; they are constitutive of how the sūtras position themselves vis-à-vis their readers and the wider Buddhist tradition. An instrumentalist translation that treats these passages as repetitive or formulaic material to be condensed or paraphrased has, in effect, severed the sūtra from the textuality through which it does its religious work.

The convergence of Shimoda's methodological argument, Gummer's translation-theoretical argument, and the textual evidence of self-referential passages points towards a single conclusion: an instrumentalist approach to Mahāyāna sūtra translation is not merely theoretically inadequate, but is at odds with what the sūtras themselves present themselves as doing. This is, in my view, the strongest case against instrumentalism in the specific domain of Mahāyāna sūtra translation, and it is a case that does not rely on the broader translation-theoretical or Buddhist-philosophical arguments to which I shall now turn. The texts themselves resist the instrumentalist reading; a translator attentive to what the texts claim about themselves cannot honor those claims while operating within an instrumentalist framework.

Philological Instrumentalism: The Case of “Buddhist Hybrid English”

Perhaps the most fully articulated example of philological instrumentalism in Buddhist studies as an academic discipline is Paul Griffiths' 1981 essay “Buddhist

26. Gummer, “Translating the Buddha's Body,” 56–62.

27. Alexander James O'Neill, “Self-Referential Passages in Mahāyāna Sūtra Literature,” *Pacific World Journal* 4, no. 1 (2020): 41–57.

Hybrid English: Some Notes on Philology and Hermeneutics for Buddhologists.”²⁸ Griffiths’ essay is worth engaging at length because it is unusually candid in stating the methodological commitments that, I would argue, inform a great deal of philologically oriented Buddhist studies, which continue to refer to it as canon, even where those commitments are not made as explicit as Griffiths makes them.

Let me begin by acknowledging the genuine problem that Griffiths’ essay identifies. There is, beyond reasonable dispute, a recognizable register of English in which a substantial body of Buddhist translation has been produced, and which functions as a kind of dialect comprehensible only to initiates. Griffiths coins the term “Buddhist Hybrid English” by analogy with Edgerton’s “Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit” to describe this register, and his diagnosis that such translations often serve neither scholars nor practitioners adequately and that they circulate as authoritative, despite their opacity, captures something real. The problem of inaccessible scholarly translations of Buddhist texts is genuine, and any anti-instrumentalist account of Buddhist translation that hopes to take Griffiths’ diagnosis seriously must address it. The difficulty is not with Griffiths’ diagnosis but with his prescriptions. These rest on a cluster of philologically instrumentalist assumptions.

Griffiths argues, in the first place, that Buddhist thought has had a “deplorable” effect on the languages it has touched, producing “barbaric” bastardizations of Sanskrit, Tibetan, Chinese, and now English.²⁹ The rhetorical extremity of this claim presupposes that languages possess inherent natures or essences that can be corrupted by foreign intrusions, a thoroughgoing linguistic essentialism that, I would argue, runs precisely counter to the central commitments of the Buddhist philosophical traditions that Griffiths professed to study. Every natural language is, in fact, a hybrid; English itself is a creole of Germanic and Romance elements augmented by extensive borrowings from Latin, Greek, French, and dozens of other languages, and the suggestion that it has an essence that could be polluted by Buddhist technical vocabulary is, on inspection, a curious one. More to the present point, the Sinitic Buddhist lexicon, with its eventual transmission into Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese, became a generative cultural vocabulary across East Asia precisely through what Griffiths would presumably consider a “deplorable” process of productive contamination. *Bodhi* (菩提), *dhyāna* (禪), *kalpa* (劫), *karma* (業), and many other terms are no longer foreign intrusions but core vocabulary, and the cultural achievements they have made possible across East Asian intellectual and religious history do not seem to be diminished by their hybrid etymology.

28. Paul J. Griffiths, “Buddhist Hybrid English: Some Notes on Philology and Hermeneutics for Buddhologists,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 4, no. 2 (1981): 17–32.

29. Griffiths, “Buddhist Hybrid English,” 17 and 24.

Griffiths argues, in the second place, that the appropriate response to the inadequacy of Buddhist Hybrid English is not to translate better but, rather, not to translate at all.³⁰ As he suggests regarding Conze's translation of the *Perfection of Wisdom* scriptures, the problem is not (as many contemporary scholars frequently hold) that "his fault... lies in a bad rendering of the text, but in that he decided to translate it at all."³¹ Scholars, in his view, should summarize anew rather than render, work only from critical editions, prefer Sanskrit when available over Chinese or Tibetan, and engage in scholarship without religious motivation, treating Buddhist texts as objects for objective hermeneutic analysis.³² Each of these prescriptions warrants examination.

The argument against translation in favor of summary assumes a hard distinction between the work the translation does (which Griffiths regards as unreliable) and the work summary does (which he regards as relatively reliable). But a summary is, of course, a kind of translation; it is an interpretive rendering of a source into a target language, accountable to the same hermeneutical demands and subject to the same possibilities of misrepresentation (it would seem an obvious point). The notion that summary somehow bypasses the problems Griffiths identifies in translation is, on closer inspection, not sustainable. What Griffiths' position amounts to is a preference for one kind of interpretive intervention (summary) over another (translation), on grounds that are not made fully explicit.

The argument against using Chinese or Tibetan recensions when Sanskrit is available rests on the assumption that Sanskrit, as the "original," carries an *invariant* that the secondary recensions *distort*, and that scholarly access to that invariant is therefore best achieved by working from the Sanskrit. This is philological instrumentalism in a particularly clear form. The problems with it are several. Many important Mahāyāna texts survive only in Chinese or Tibetan, the Sanskrit having been lost; if Griffiths' prescription were followed in such cases, large bodies of Buddhist literature would simply be inaccessible to scholarship. More importantly, the Chinese and Tibetan recensions are not merely defective copies of a lost Sanskrit original; they are themselves primary documents of the interpretive traditions that shaped Buddhism's development in East Asia and Tibet. Often, they are the only records of much earlier recensions of texts originating in Prakrits like Gāndhārī, which fossilized into very different forms after their Sanskritization. Viewing them as secondary witnesses to a stable Sanskrit text minimizes the significance of cross-cultural transmission, which is central to most accounts of Buddhism's history. Furthermore, this view assumes that "Sanskrit" is the original, when it is

30. Griffiths, "Buddhist Hybrid English," 26–30.

31. Griffiths, "Buddhist Hybrid English," 29.

32. Griffiths, "Buddhist Hybrid English," 30.

evident that Sanskrit recensions of sūtras were translations from Prakrits—whose ambiguities, well known to those who read Prakrits such as Gāndhārī, are just as susceptible to distortion from Sanskritization as from translation into Chinese.³³

The argument for working only from critical editions rests on a related assumption, namely that the philological process of establishing a critical text recovers, or at least approximates, an original invariant whose features can then ground a faithful translation. This is, in fact, the deepest form of philological instrumentalism, and it is the one most directly at odds with contemporary developments in manuscript studies. Collett Cox's contribution to the Collett volume, "Translation in Search of a Text: The Craving for Stability," argues that the very drive to establish a stable critical text is itself a cultural and interpretive act, not a neutral scholarly procedure that recovers something pre-existing.³⁴ The instability of manuscript traditions, the productive value of variant readings, and the scholarly importance of peripheral and non-canonical versions of texts have become increasingly recognized in the discipline. To translate only from critical editions is, in this light, to translate from a particular kind of artefact, the modern critical text, while declining to engage with the textual situations in which most Buddhist literature actually exists.

The argument against religious motivation in scholarship is perhaps the most loaded of Griffiths' prescriptions. It presupposes a hard distinction between the practitioner, whose engagement with Buddhist texts is religiously motivated and therefore epistemically unreliable, and the scholar, whose engagement is disinterested and therefore reliable. This distinction is, in my view, neither sustainable in principle nor reflective of the actual conditions under which Buddhist studies is conducted, particularly in the present moment. The career of Luis O. Gómez, a committed Rinzai Zen practitioner whose various scholarly, yet accessible and *creative*, translations (such as his work on the *Sukhāvatīyūha* sūtras)³⁵ demonstrate clearly that practitioner-scholarship is compatible with the highest standards of philological rigor. In his remarks at the 2017 Translation and Transmission Conference, given shortly before his death, Gómez observed that "words seldom mean one thing; they are naturally elastic" and characterized translation as a multi-layered social communication act that integrates philological analysis with attention to meaning, audience, and context.³⁶ The idea of disinterested scholarship

33. Simply by way of example for one, central, Mahāyāna text, see Seishi Karashima, "Was the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* Compiled in Gandhāra in Gāndhārī?" *ARIRIAB* XVI (March 2013), 171–188.

34. Collett Cox, "Translation in Search of a Text: The Craving for Stability," in *Translating Buddhism*, 19–47.

35. Luis O. Gómez, *The Land of Bliss: The Paradise of the Buddha of Measureless Light. Sanskrit and Chinese Versions of the Sukhāvatīyūha Sūtras* (University of Hawai'i Press, 1996).

36. Luis O. Gómez, remarks at the plenary session "Approaches to Translation and Transmission," Translation and Transmission Conference, Boulder, CO, June 2017, recording archived by the Tsadra Foundation.

is, in any case, itself a normatively loaded position, one that imports a particular epistemology, broadly positivist, broadly secular, into a domain where it has no automatic claim to authority. Translation, as Venuti argues throughout his work, is always a social act embedded in the translator's institutional and cultural position; the claim to disinterestedness does not eliminate that embeddedness, it merely obscures it.

The cumulative effect of Griffiths' prescriptions, then, is to install philological instrumentalism as the methodological default for Buddhist studies, while presenting this installation as a return to scholarly rigor rather than as the imposition of a particular and contestable theoretical framework. I would distinguish, in concluding this engagement with Griffiths, between his diagnosis (poor translations circulate as authoritative; opaque jargon serves neither scholars nor practitioners) and his prescription (therefore *don't translate*, and if you do, do so *only* from critical editions, *only* from Sanskrit, *only* without religious motivation). The diagnosis is largely sound. The prescription does not follow from it. A humanistic alternative, to which I shall now turn, would respond to the same diagnosis by calling for translation that is more transparent about its interpretive choices, more open to plurality, more attentive to the secondary traditions, and more willing to engage the contemplative and performative dimensions of the texts. The goal is not the elimination of translation, but the elimination of canonical translation that brooks no challenge.

Buddhist Perspectives on Language as a Resource for Translation Theory

I now wish to construct a second argument against instrumentalism, drawing not from western translation theory but from resources intrinsic to Buddhist philosophy of language. The argument is presented as a convergence rather than a conclusive demonstration; I do not assert that Buddhist philosophical sources necessarily endorse an anti-instrumentalist theory of translation, but rather that certain strands of Buddhist thought regarding language are notably aligned with the anti-instrumentalist position elaborated in the previous sections. Furthermore, this alignment holds significant intellectual value for Buddhist translators.

The relevant body of Buddhist thought is the *apoha* theory of meaning, developed by Dignāga (c. 480–540 CE) in the *Pramāṇasamuccaya* and substantially extended by Dharmakīrti (c. 600–660 CE) in the *Pramāṇavārttika* and related works.³⁷ The *apoha* theory holds that words do not denote their objects by referring to positive universals, essential properties, or shared essences; instead, words signify by means

37. For an accessible overview, see Tom J. F. Tillemans, "Dharmakīrti," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, first published 2011; substantive revision 2023.

of the *exclusion of what is other* (*anyāpoha*). To borrow the standard example, the word “cow” does not pick out a positive cowness inhering in all cows; it signifies by excluding everything that is not a cow. The theory is, in its broader philosophical setting, part of the Dignāga-Dharmakīrti school’s nominalist response to the realist theories of universals advanced by their Brahmanical interlocutors in the Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā traditions.³⁸

The implications of the *apoha* theory for the question of linguistic meaning are far-reaching, and they have been developed in considerable technical detail in the substantial secondary literature on the Dignāga-Dharmakīrti school, to which I cannot do justice in the present paper.³⁹ What I wish to extract from the theory, for this argument, is a single point: on the *apoha* view, words do not attach to fixed essences in the world that could serve as an invariant for transfer between languages. Meaning, on this view, is contextual, relational, and functions through differentiation rather than through designation. If words signify by exclusion rather than by reference to shared essences, then the instrumentalist’s invariant, the fixed meaning core that translation aims to preserve, has no clear counterpart in the structure of language as the *apoha* theorists describe it.

The *apoha* theory was developed in the context of Sanskrit grammatical philosophy and Buddhist anti-realist metaphysics; it was not formulated as a theory of translation, and to apply it to translation theory is an act of philosophical extrapolation. I would maintain that the extrapolation is intellectually productive, however, for two reasons. First, it shows that an anti-instrumentalist position on translation is not foreign to Buddhist intellectual resources; one strand of the Buddhist philosophy of language is, in fact, strikingly congruent with the position I am defending. Second, it adds a measure of irony to the historical observation made in the preceding sections, namely that Buddhist translators have, by and large, operated within instrumentalist frameworks. Buddhist translators inherited and often endorsed an account of language that the Dignāga-Dharmakīrti tradition gave them the philosophical resources to question, which I would argue is also present in the *Prajñāpāramitā* tradition of non-apprehension and seeing words as “mere designations” to which a bodhisattva must not be attached.

It is worth noting, in candor, that not all strands of Buddhist thought about language would support this convergence. One of the Shingon school’s foundational texts, Kūkai’s *Shōji Jissōgi* (聲字實相義; *The Meanings of Sound, Letter, and Reality*), articulates a position in which letters and words possess inherent ontological

38. Mark Siderits, Tom Tillemans, and Arindam Chakrabarti, eds., *Apoha: Buddhist Nominalism and Human Cognition* (Columbia University Press, 2011), 1–4.

39. For technical developments, see in particular Tom J. F. Tillemans, *Scripture, Logic, Language: Essays on Dharmakīrti and His Tibetan Successors* (Wisdom Publications, 1999), and the essays collected in Siderits, Tillemans, and Chakrabarti, *Apoha*.

reality as manifestations of Mahāvairocana's Dharma-body.⁴⁰ This is a Buddhist instrumentalism of a distinctive kind, in which letters do carry essential meanings, and the work of translation would presumably take on a sacramental character quite different from the hermeneutical alternative I am proposing. A full Buddhist philosophy of translation would have to engage with the diversity of Buddhist positions on language, and the *apoha* tradition is only one resource among several. For present purposes, what I want to claim is the more modest point: there exists, within the Buddhist philosophical tradition, a substantial and influential account of language on which the instrumentalist assumption of transferable invariants is unfounded, and Buddhist translators have resources within their own tradition for thinking against the dominant instrumentalist framework.

Towards Radical Translatability

I have argued, to this point, that instrumentalism in Buddhist translation is methodologically unsound on translation-theoretical grounds (following Venuti), at odds with the nature of Mahāyāna sūtras as scriptural objects (following Shimoda, Gummer, and my own prior work), philologically problematic in the form Griffiths gives it, and questionable from within Buddhist philosophy of language itself (following the *apoha* tradition). What I have not yet done is to articulate the positive alternative. I should like to close by sketching what I shall call radical translatability, in deliberate inversion of the Cassin-Apter discourse of untranslatability, as a program for Buddhist translation practice. Radical translatability has, I would suggest, four interlocking commitments.

The first is transparency and plurality over authority. The appropriate response to the genuine problem that poor translations circulate as canonical is not restriction but proliferation. Multiple translations of the same text are, on this view, a scholarly resource rather than a redundancy, since each is an interpretive argument about the text, and the field advances through the multiplication of such arguments rather than the imposition of any one of them. This is particularly true of Mahāyāna sūtras, whose recension histories and discursive structures make them unusually amenable to diverse translational approaches, and whose performative dimensions, as Gummer has shown, are responded to differently by different translators. Far from being a problem to be solved, the plurality of translations is, on the radical translatability view, the condition of intellectual life in Buddhist translation studies.

40. For an accessible English translation, see Rolf W. Giebel trans., "The Meanings of Sound, Sign, and Reality," in *Shingon Texts* (Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2004), 83–104.

The second commitment is foreignization as a default orientation. Following Venuti, and following the practical model of Kumārajīva, translations of Buddhist texts should tend to retain the productive strangeness of source-culture concepts, resisting the temptation to naturalize Sanskrit or Classical Chinese vocabulary and concepts into familiar idioms that efface their origins. This does not require producing impenetrable prose; Kumārajīva's example shows that accessibility and foreignization are not mutually exclusive commitments. It also requires being alert to the domesticating impulse and making conscious choices about when and why to resist it. Xuanzang's "five untranslatables," read against their instrumentalist grain, offer a usable framework: there are categories of terms, including technical Buddhist vocabulary, polysemic terms, and terms whose preservation in their source form conduces to respect for the tradition, for which foreignizing transcription is the appropriate translational response.

The third commitment is the acceptance of practitioner-scholarship as a legitimate, perhaps in some cases indispensable, mode of Buddhist translation. The career of Gómez, as I have already discussed, makes the case for the compatibility of practice and rigor. I would add that, for certain genres of Buddhist text, particularly liturgical, contemplative, and devotional texts whose meaning is inseparable from their performance, a translator who has engaged with the tradition as a practitioner may be better placed to make the interpretive decisions that translation requires than one who approaches the texts purely as an external analyst. I do not claim that all Buddhist translators must be practitioners; I claim only that the categorical exclusion of practitioner-scholarship, as some have urged, is unwarranted and possibly ideologically motivated.

The fourth commitment is to the translation of marginalized, peripheral, and formally experimental texts. The instrumentalist tradition has tended to privilege the translation of canonical, philosophically dense, and well-edited texts, treating these as the appropriate site for serious academic work. A radical translatability programme would invert this preference, taking seriously the translation of rare and unusual texts, of texts surviving only in Chinese or Tibetan (and, even more so, of lesser-studied languages like Newar, Mongolian, Vietnamese, Burmese, and so forth), of performative texts whose claims exceed doctrinal characterization, and of texts whose situations preclude critical editions. Formal experimentation in translation, including the rendering of verse as verse rather than as prose lines, attention to register and tone, and the development of translational strategies adequate to the performative dimensions of the source texts, is endorsed as central to the work rather than peripheral to it.

A Coda on Machine Translation

I want to close with a brief reflection on the question of machine translation, which has become more pressing in the few years since the deployment of large language models capable of producing fluent target-language renderings of Buddhist source texts. My contention is that machine translation is the *reductio ad absurdum* of instrumentalism. It is what translation looks like when the assumption of mechanical substitution is implemented without remainder. Its products reveal, with unusual clarity, what is absent when the creative, interpretive, scholarly, and contemplative dimensions of translation are stripped from the practice.

This is not, I want to be clear, an argument against the use of computational tools in the work of human translators. Lexicographic databases such as Charles Muller's *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism*, optical character recognition, handwritten text recognition for manuscript materials, and other computational aids, like the variety of tools offered by the Dharmamitra project, have transformed the conditions under which human translation of Buddhist texts is undertaken, and the transformation is, on the whole, an enrichment. What I want to maintain is the distinction between translation as a tool, which is what machine translation aspires to be, and translation as a human interpretive act, which is what computational aids cannot replace but only support. The instrumentalist framework cannot mark this distinction because it lacks the resources to recognize the interpretive dimension of translation as constitutive rather than incidental. A humanistic framework, of the kind I have been defending, can mark it, and indeed must mark it if it is to make sense of what human translators do that machines, at present, cannot.

The wider stakes are, I think, considerable. If translation is reduced to the kind of activity that machine translation can in principle perform, then the human practice of translation is rendered economically and institutionally precarious,⁴¹ and the rich tradition of Buddhist translation as commentary, as deep reading, and as religious and contemplative practice is impoverished accordingly. The argument for human translation as a humanistic practice is not about inefficiency or sentiment. Instead, it emphasizes the unique kinds of meaning that only humans can create, which machines, limited by their instrumentalist design, cannot. This does not mean translators should avoid using machine translation as a helpful tool any more than they should forego digital dictionaries and return to paper ones; rather, it affirms that the human remains the foundation of the process and the final arbiter on how to interpret a text and how to present it in a humanistic and creative manner that generates *new meaning* in the target language.

41. Not that translators of Buddhist texts have ever expected it to be a source of reliable income.

Conclusion

I have argued, across the preceding sections that instrumentalism, the assumption that translation transfers an invariant from the source text into the target text, is methodologically unsound and pragmatically detrimental in the domain of Buddhist translation. The argument has proceeded along several converging lines. From translation theory, following Venuti, instrumentalism oversimplifies what translation actually is. From the historical evidence of Sinitic Buddhist translation theory, instrumentalism has been the dominant framework, but a humanistic alternative is visible in Kumārajīva's practice and, when read against its instrumentalist grain, in Xuanzang's foreignizing categories. From recent scholarship on Mahāyāna sūtras, particularly the work of Shimoda and Gummer, instrumentalism is at odds with what the sūtras themselves present themselves as doing, namely, *performative* scriptural acts whose textuality is *constitutive* of their religious efficacy. From the case of "Buddhist Hybrid English," we see that philological instrumentalism rests on a cluster of essentialist and ideologically motivated assumptions that do not survive close examination. Within Buddhist philosophy of language, the *apoha* tradition of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti provides resources for thinking against the instrumentalist assumption of transferable invariants.

The positive alternative I have called radical translatability and have sketched in terms of four commitments: to transparency and plurality, to foreignization, to the legitimacy of practitioner-scholarship, and to the translation of marginalized and formally experimental texts. The program is offered as a contribution to the nascent subfield of Buddhist translation studies, and as a response to the practical and institutional pressures that machine translation, in particular, is placing on the human practice of Buddhist translation.

Several topics have been deliberately reserved for future work. The Tibetan translation tradition, with its sophisticated theoretical apparatus and the institutional infrastructure of the *lo tsā ba* tradition, would repay sustained engagement, as would the approaches taken in the lesser-studied languages like Newar and others; I have not had space to address these here. The reception of Buddhist translation debates in Japanese Buddhist intellectual history, particularly in the esoteric traditions that maintain that there remains a kind of speech at the level of ultimate reality, raises further questions about the diversity of Buddhist philosophical positions on language and their implications for translation. The contrast between *apoha*-based and Esoteric-based Buddhist philosophies of language, which I have only gestured towards, would itself merit a separate study. What I hope to have established here is a starting point: that instrumentalism in Buddhist translation is neither inevitable nor unchallenged, and that resources for an alternative are available both in contemporary translation theory and within the Buddhist tradition itself.

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