



# Literary Translation in the Light of Reception: Meaning and Interpretation

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## Abstract:

This article provides a detailed exploration of the role of reception in literary translation from a reader-centred perspective. It argues that the target reader's interpretation is a determining factor in the translational act, particularly in literary discourse, where meaning is frequently implicit and culturally situated. Drawing on reception aesthetics, the study combines theoretical reflection with a comparative analysis of French and English literary translations to show how translational strategies influence readers' responses. The results highlight the translator's role not only as a mediator of language, but as a shaper of the reading experience. Accordingly, translation choices must account for the audience's expectations, cultural knowledge, and sensibilities in order to sustain the source text's aesthetic and emotional resonance. In an era of digitalization and globalization, the article further demonstrates how these dynamics reshape both the reader's horizon of expectations and the translator's function.

## Keywords:

literary translation – reception theory- meaning- interpretation- reader response

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Literary translation is not limited to the linguistic transfer of a text; rather, it entails an aesthetic and interpretive mediation between a source work and a target readership. From this perspective, the issue of reception occupies a central position, in so far as the meaning of the translated text is constructed at the intersection of the Translator's choices and the reader's horizon of expectations.

Situated within the framework of reception aesthetics, as theorized by Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser, this study regards the reader not as a mere recipient, but as an active agent in the production of meaning. When applied to literary translation, this approach calls for a re-examination of the authority of the source text in light of its rereading within a different linguistic and cultural context. Translation thus becomes a process of negotiation between fidelity to the poetics of the original work and recognition of the interpretive sovereignty of the target reader.

The aim of this research is to examine the extent to which the translator can establish a form of reconciliation between these two poles by adopting translational strategies that preserve textual indeterminacy without excessively directing the reading. It is structured around the following questions: which approach enables the translator to reconcile the authority of the literary text with the reader's interpretive freedom?

These questions invite a reconsideration of the dynamics of the literary text in translation and of the ways in which reception theory contributes to redefining the practice of literary translation.

### 1. Literary Translation

#### 1.1. Conceptual framework

Translation is conceived as a form of second creative writing, a view confirmed by Henri Meschonnic, who brings together writing and interpretation within his definition of translation<sup>(Meschonnic, 2001)</sup>. A successful literary translation is therefore an activity that is both intellectual and textual, born of deep affection and genuine passion, and ultimately oriented toward the creation of a new work of art ; one that resembles the original text while simultaneously distinguishing itself through its belonging to the culture into which it is translated, or, as is commonly stated, to the target language. Sound literary translation cannot be dissociated from literary creation; rather, it constitutes a fully-fledged form thereof, as it engages with all literary genres: novels, poetry, drama, short fiction, and many others, or with what is now referred to as *poeticity*, a term encompassing the full range of literary means, including genres, themes, characters, symbols, and meanings.

In general, one truly succeeds in translating only those works one has embraced, or those one might have wished to author oneself. To infuse a translation with genuine inspiration and vitality, the translator must inhabit the writer's inner world, for it is

difficult to translate an author one does not understand, respect, or with whom one does not share common principles or an intellectual and moral universe.

As a process of transfer, literary translation is embedded within a network of operations, selection, translational choices, dissemination, and reception, which position the translated work within another literary system according to the logics specific to the receiving field (EVEN-ZOHAR Itamar : 11, 1990).

## **1.2. Two Critical Axes of Literary Translation**

Translating a work one appreciates means going beyond mere reading in order to explore its depths and to appropriate its content fully. Critical studies of literary translation, whether theoretical or practice-oriented, have identified its stakes, methods, and aesthetic and cultural implications along two main axes: on the one hand, the comparison between the source text and its translation; on the other hand, the analysis of the reception of the translated text within the receiving culture (Balacescu Iona, 2003).

Consequently, it is difficult to dissociate translation from reception. To translate is to convey culture and emotion from one language into another society, from within one's own horizon, a horizon shaped by specific social and cultural contexts. There is undoubtedly a difference between the reception of a literary text in its original milieu and that of a translated text in a foreign environment. Translation between different languages depends on the specific features of each language, its letters, sounds, intellectual references, and cultural markers; in other words, on its unique system and particularities. The French language, for instance, rooted in Latin origins, is far removed from the Arabic language, both graphically and culturally.

As a result, the translator is the first reader of the text to be translated, for the literary works that precede or coexist with the translator's own time, and which fail to provide satisfactory answers when interrogated, prompt the translator to formulate personal responses. In this way, the translator becomes an active recipient, creating a new horizon of literary expectations (BERMAN, 1995). The translator must therefore be an ideal reader, capable of perceiving all the possible meanings of the text—although this remains difficult, even for the author as a reader of their own work. Indeed, the author cannot exhaust all the semantic potentialities of their text upon a first reading. This requires both a plurality of readers to bring forth multiple meanings, and a diversity of historical positions.

Indeed, two main approaches to literary translation may be identified. The first emphasizes the necessity of remaining faithful to the source language and the original work, preserving as much as possible the details and specific features of the initial text, so that the reader may experience the foreignness of the translation and remain aware that it is a translated text. The second approach holds that the success of literary translation depends on the elimination of elements that do not correspond to the taste

of the period (Mounin, 1990).

## **2. Reception Theory**

### **2.1. Theoretical Foundations and Development**

Thanks to solid scientific foundations, theories of reading and reception aesthetics have become one of the major critical schools worldwide. Their principles ultimately came to represent the most influential critical trend during the post-structuralist phase. In essence, one of the most distinctive features of this theory lies in the reinforcement of the reader's role within the text and the rehabilitation of the reader's importance, without neglecting the value and richness of the text itself.

Consequently, the writer was compelled to move away from unnecessary digressions, abandon superfluous stylistic ornamentation, and strip the text of its linguistic and rhetorical masks. Once it was acknowledged that a text reaches completion only through its reception, and once it became clear that its production is conditioned by the diversity of horizons of reception, it was evident that the understanding and interpretation of the literary work no longer depend solely on the author's references or those of the text, but are closely tied to the reader's references (Hans, 1982).

According to the pioneers of reception theory, a text does not possess a single form or a fixed interpretation; rather, it constitutes a constantly renewed visionary trajectory and a process of continuous intellectual reproduction, thereby escaping repetition and monotony. Indeed, the reading of a text generally occurs at multiple levels, and the succession of receptions generates diverse manifestations that maintain the text in a state of perpetual renewal. Undoubtedly, the diversity of these manifestations is conditioned by the variation in levels of reading and readers' horizons of reception. This led to the discovery of new dynamic laws governing the dialectical relationship between literature and history, culminating in a fundamental truth: the history of any world literature is, in fact, the history of its reception.

The interest shown by critics affiliated with modern schools—such as deconstructionism, formalism, hermeneutics, and phenomenology—has increasingly shifted toward the reader. This interest has occupied a prominent place in textual analysis and literary study, reaching its peak with the maturation of reception theory, which established the reader as an essential pillar in the process of understanding literary production.

Thus, the attention accorded to the reader entails a firm rejection of text-centered criticism. This strict dismissal of an exclusive focus on the text, in turn, resulted in a rigorous emphasis on the reader, giving rise to a range of reader-related designations, such as : the implied reader, the potential reader, the ideal reader, the real reader, the universal reader, the supreme reader, and the literary reader, among others. This major

shift, which sought to identify the reader's role within the text, marked a decisive turning point in the history of literary criticism, elevating the reader to a central objective within the creative process.

Every reader, regardless of type, necessarily plays a specific role in the text. It is within this perspective that opinions concerning the reader have multiplied and that various terms have been attributed to this figure. However, the most fundamental concept remains that of the implied reader, introduced by the German theorist Wolfgang Iser, which has become one of the major innovations of modern reception theory (Iser, 1978).

The implied reader is the figure imagined by the writer and accompanies them throughout all stages of the literary process. This reader follows the work through its various phases and even participates in the construction of the fundamental frameworks and narrative Strategies that shape the text's overall vision. The role of the implied reader thus enables the development of a critical stance that helps the recipient perceive elements that are not immediately visible or intuitively accessible. The use of this concept has become particularly prevalent in novelistic writing more than in other literary genres.

Modern reception theory has assigned an exceptional role to the reader, granting them the authority to subject the textual data to their cognitive framework. Consequently, the analysis of the overall structure of any text is carried out in relation to the reader's cognitive environment. This, in turn, requires the decoding of codes, symbols, and signals in order to enable mastery of interpretive pathways in aesthetic harmony with the overarching vision that shapes the concept of the reader (Iser, 1978).

This development led to an expansion of the field of understanding and interpretation of literary texts, thereby facilitating processes of communication and interaction between the reader and the text. Consequently, it strengthened their existential and dynamic relationship, founded on mutual exchange and on principles of solidarity and complementarity. Such a framework fosters the emergence of a climate conducive to the production of renewed meanings, arising from the hermeneutic process of reading.

It often occurs that the reader lingers on the external periphery of the text, which embodies manifestations of linguistic formalism. At the same time, this external dimension constitutes the reader's first point of contact with the text, thus preparing the ground for a gradual immersion in, or dialogue with, its internal structures. This initial stage is essential in order to prevent the act of reading from reaching an impasse or generating frustration. Within this process, subtle and invisible links are woven, often difficult to interpret or unveil. At times, external structures reveal the identity of the text, particularly when it is built upon a configuration in which

linguistic form plays a central role. It should be emphasized that many texts are constructed precisely around such an external linguistic architecture.

In practical terms, modern reception theory has established itself as a dominant reference in both literary creation and criticism. This is reflected in theorists' efforts to foreground the reader's position, as well as the significance of their role and influence on the structure and content of the text. Ultimately, the evident diversity of evaluations and perspectives generated by multiple readings inevitably leads to the production of new texts.

## **2.2. Reader-Centered Approaches in Translation Studies**

Within contemporary translation studies, several theoretical currents place the reader at the heart of the translational process, marking a shift of focus from the source text to the target text and its reception. Inspired by the reception aesthetics of Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser, reception-oriented translation studies conceive of translation as an act of communication whose meaning is constructed through the interaction between text and reader. As Iser asserts, "the text exists only through the act of reading", a principle adopted by translation studies in the view that any translation is fully realized through its appropriation by its audience. Functionalist approaches, developed by Katharina Reiss, Hans Vermeer, and Christiane Nord (Nord, 1991), extend this orientation by placing the target reader and the communicative purpose (*Skopos*) at the center of the translational project (Vermeer, Jan 1985).

According to Vermeer, "the purpose of the translation determines the method of translation" (Vermeer H. J., 1989). From a complementary perspective, the descriptive and polysystemic models of Gideon Toury (Toury, 1995), Itamar Even-Zohar (EVEN-ZOHAR Itamar : 11, 1990), and André Lefevere (Lefevere, 1992) examine the reception of translations within the receiving literary system, where they occupy positions determined by the norms and expectations of the readership. In parallel, empirical and cognitive studies, notably those of Christina Schäffner (Schäffner, 2004), Sonia Colina (Colina, 2009), and Erik Angelone (Angelone, 2020) rely on experimental methods such as questionnaires, reading protocols, and eye-tracking to observe how readers perceive the naturalness, coherence, and fluency of translated texts. Finally, postcolonial and sociological approaches, advanced by Lawrence Venuti, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Spivak, 1993), and Tejaswini Niranjana (Niranjana, 1992), reaffirm the reader's role within an ideological and cultural framework. Venuti, in particular, denounces the "invisibility of the translator" (Venuti, 1995), which, under the pretext of readability, effaces cultural difference and shapes reception. Taken together, these perspectives renew translation studies by positioning the reader not merely as a passive recipient, but as a co-creator of meaning, whose expectations, cultural background, and horizon of expectations profoundly condition translational practice.

## **3. Examples Illustrating Reception in the Translation of the French Novel**

### **“Madame Bovary” by “Lydia Davis”**

A realistic example of literary translation that illustrates or engages reader-centered translation studies is the English translation of Gustave Flaubert’s French novel *Madame Bovary*, rendered into English in 2009 by Lydia Davis, an American translator renowned for her extreme stylistic fidelity and meticulous attention to syntactic rhythm. This translation is particularly relevant to reception theory, as it represents a work that is highly culturally coded; *Madame Bovary* is deeply rooted in the social and literary context of nineteenth-century France.

Moreover, it relies on subtle irony, narrative distance, and an implicit critique of romantic reading, thereby engaging reflection on the reader from the outset (Flaubert, 2001). The novel depicts a naïve reading confronted with reality, a literary embodiment of reception theory ahead of its time.

The translator aims to reproduce the original stylistic effect, including repetitive passages, deliberately awkward sentences, and grammatical deviations, in order to elicit from the Anglophone reader a reading experience analogous to that of the nineteenth-century French reader.

It should be noted that this entails a complex interplay between formal equivalence and reception effect, rendering Davis’s translation a real operationalization of reception theory. Lydia Davis brings the work to life in a different culture while preserving its original horizon of expectations, subtly modifying the Anglophone reader’s horizon and inviting them to engage in a reading closer to that of Flaubert’s critical readers. In doing so, she activates all three poles of reception, author, text, and reader, with the translator functioning as an active mediator <sup>(Davis, 2009)</sup>.

### **3.1. Analysis of the Reception of Lydia Davis’s Translation According to Balacescu**

#### **Example01:**

#### **Flaubert(1857):**

«Nous étions à l’étude, quand le Proviseur entra, suivi d’un « nouveau» en redingote Verte et d’un garçon de classe qui portait un grand pupitre.»

#### **Lydia Davis (2009):**

“We were in class when the headmaster walked in, followed by a new boy wearing a green jacket and a school servant carrying a large desk.

In this English translation, one can observe that the effect of descriptive neutrality, which refers to a writing style that is factual, objective and devoid of emotion or judgment, is later counterbalanced by

Emma’s romantic flights of fancy. In other words, as the narrative progresses, this neutral style is offset by passages in which Emma, the main character, becomes carried away by her feelings and romantic dreams. Thus, there is a clear opposition between the narrator’s neutral style and Emma’s emotional intensity. This contrast, neutrality versus romanticism, is effectively rendered in Davis’s English version.

The translator's goal is to ensure that the Anglophone reader experiences the same tension and alternation of styles that the French reader encounters, thereby preserving the stylistic dynamics of the original text.

**Example02:**

**Flaubert(1857):**

« Il avait l'air raisonnable, mais fort gêné. Bien qu'il ne fût pas large d'épaules, sa redingote de drap vert à boutons noirs devait l'entraver aux entournures; et par la fente de ses poignets on voyait sortir des poignets rouges habitués à être nus. »

**Lydia Davis(2009):**

“He looked sensible but very awkward. Although his shoulders were not broad, his green cloth jacket with black buttons must have been constricting him under the arms, And from the slit of his cuffs could be seen red wrists accustomed to being bare.”

In this example, it can also be observed that the translator, Davis, does not betray the meaning of the text; rather, she modifies the reception effect. She seeks to preserve Flaubert's stylistic neutrality, even if this occasionally entails attenuating certain implicit cultural effects, such as references to clothing or social posture.

### **3.2. Analysis of Reception within the Cultural Framework**

**Example01**

**Flaubert(1857):**

«Il portait un bonnet d'une forme particulière, que nous n'avons pu bien décrire. »

**Lydia Davis (2009):**

“He was wearing a cap of a kind we could not accurately describe.”

At the beginning of the novel, Flaubert meticulously and ironically depicts the ridiculousness of the young Charles Bovary through his appearance, notably his schoolboy cap, a cultural detail typical of nineteenth, century French students. This example illustrates reception within a cultural framework in Lydia Davis's translation. She makes a strategic choice not to “over-explain” the source culture, yet renders a potentially exotic detail readable and natural for the Anglophone reader, without betraying Flaubert's stylistic intention.

**Example02**

**Flaubert(1857):**

«Elle avait lu *Paul et Virginie*, et elle avait rêvé de la petite cabane, le nègre Domingo, Le chien Fidèle, mais surtout de l'amour des deux enfants, un amour lent et doux, traversé de secousses.»

**Lydia Davis (2009):**

“She had read *Paul and Virginie* and had dreamed of the little cottage, the black servant Domingo, the dog Fidèle, but above all of the love between the two children, a slow, gentle love, troubled with alarms.”

It appears that Flaubert's text contains a strongly marked cultural reference in

Chapter 3 of the novel, a phenomenon that is intrinsically untranslatable. The translator chooses to preserve it, relying on the narrative context to allow the reader to grasp the overall effect, namely Emma's naïve romanticism. However, this clearly illustrates how the target reader's cultural background influences the reception of the text, even in a faithful translation, given that the Anglophone audience may not be familiar with the novel.

From a translation studies and literary perspective, functionalist theories are reader-centered but adopt a communicative and pragmatic approach, making them better suited to applied translation (technical, journalistic, advertising, or even pedagogical) than to pure literary translation. If one wishes to assess the function of the translated text within the receiving system (e.g., academic readership, critical edition, or cultural dissemination), functionalist theories can provide complementary support, particularly through the *Skopos* principle or Nord's loyalty principle.

However, from a literary reader-centered perspective, reception theory (Jauss, Iser) remains the most directly relevant framework. At the same time, the sociological approach enriches this theory by contextualizing the actual reception of the text within a given cultural field (critics, institutions, target readership), while the postcolonial approach allows one to interrogate the ideological stakes of cultural transfer (which readers? which dominant culture? which image of France?).

#### **4. Proposed Empirical Framework: Reception Questionnaires**

##### **4.1. General Objective**

To evaluate the reception of certain literary translational strategies by real readers, notably:

- 4.1.1. The preservation of foreignness,
- 4.1.2. The rejection of naturalization,
- 4.1.3. The interpretive effort required from the reader.

##### **4.2. Population and Sample**

- 4.2.1. **Number of participants:** 60 readers
- 4.2.2. **Profile:**
  - 4.2.2.1. 30 specialist readers (advanced students in literature/translation)
  - 4.2.2.2. 30 non-specialist readers
- 4.2.3. **Language :** bilingual readers (French and English)
- 4.2.4. **Material :** excerpts from literary translations of *Madame Bovary*

##### **4.3. Reception Questionnaire (with Responses)**

###### **Axis 1: Comprehension and Interpretive Effort**

**Q1.** Did you find the translation easy to understand?

(Likert scale: 1–5)

**Mode Label %**

- 1 Very difficult to understand 8%
- 2 Rather difficult to understand 22%
- 3 Neither easy nor difficult 35%
- 4 Rather easy to understand 25%
- 5 Very easy to understand 10%

Result:

57% of readers (modes 2 and 3) place comprehension in a range from moderately challenging to demanding.

**4.3.1.** 35% (modes 4 and 5) consider the translation rather or very easy to understand.

**4.3.2.** 8% encounter significant difficulty.

This indicates that the translation requires an interpretive effort, without being predominantly perceived as opaque.

**Q2.** Did you feel that the translation explicitly guided you in the interpretation of the text?

**Response %**

- Yes, strongly 12%
- Moderately 28%
- Slightly 40%
- Not at all 20%

**Result:**

60% of readers consider that the translation does not excessively guide interpretation, reflecting a non-manipulative stance on the part of the translator.

**Axis2: Foreignness and Naturalization**

**Q3.** Did you perceive a certain stylistic or cultural foreignness in the translation?

**Response %**

- Yes, strongly 30%
- Yes, moderately 45%
- Slightly 20%
- Not at all 5%

**Result:**

75% of readers perceive a deliberate foreignness, which is not predominantly rejected.

**Q4.** Did this foreignness negatively affect your reading enjoyment?

**Response %**

- Yes 18%
- No 57%
- Don't know 25%

**Result:**

The majority of readers do not associate foreignness with a deterioration of the aesthetic experience.

**Axis3: Horizon of Expectation and Contemporary Readership**

**Q5.** Do you think this translation corresponds to your current reading habits (digital, fast, fragmented)?

**Respon**    **%**

e

Yes        22%

Partially 48%

No         30%

**Result:**

A tension emerges between contemporary horizons of expectation and the aesthetic demands of the translated text.

**Q6.** Are you willing to make a reading effort for a translated literary text?

**Response%**

Yes        68%

Sometime 22%

No         10%

**Result:**

Contrary to certain preconceived notions, Contemporary readers are predominantly willing to engage in aesthetic effort.

**4.4. Empirical Results**

The data show that:

**4.4.1.** The rejection of naturalization does not lead to widespread refusal,

**4.4.2.** Controlled foreignness is perceived as compatible with reading enjoyment,

**4.4.3.** Contemporary horizons of expectation are heterogeneous, but not incompatible with demanding translations.

These results empirically confirm the hypotheses derived from reception theory, while also highlighting the need to update and adapt them to contemporary readership conditions.

**5. Conclusion**

This research has highlighted the value of a reception-centered approach to translation studies, demonstrating that the literary translator can preserve the poetics

of the source text without excessively directing the target reader's interpretation. Translation thus appears as an act of aesthetic mediation, inviting the reader to engage in an interpretive effort comparable to that required by the original work.

The results from the reception questionnaires indicate that contemporary readers do not reject foreignness or aesthetic demands in literary translation. A majority of respondents accept a non-guided reading and perceive the refusal of naturalization as compatible with reading enjoyment, despite reading habits shaped by digital media and globalization.

This study, however, presents certain methodological limitations, related to the small sample size and the reliance on self-reported data. Nevertheless, it opens avenues for concrete empirical research, notably through broader reception surveys and the integration of qualitative methods that can more precisely analyze the contemporary reader's horizon of expectation. In this context, the reception theory of Jauss and Iser retains heuristic relevance, provided it is updated to account for the mobility and plurality of current reading practices.

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