"Translation is not just a tool – it is also a question": Interview with Mauricio Mendonça Cardozo

BYRON BYRNE-TAYLOR

Professor Mauricio Mendonça Cardozo is a preeminent scholar and translator whose career has significantly shaped contemporary translation studies in Brazil. As the Professor Titular de Teoria da Tradução e Tradução Literária at the Universidade Federal do Paraná, he has combined rigorous academic research with innovative translation practice. Cardozo earned his doctorate from the USP — with further postdoctoral work in Germany and France — which laid the foundation for an extensive body of work that bridges translation theory and literary creativity. His influential publications, including *Vida poesia tradução* (1st ed., 2021), *Antoine Berman: para além do albergue do longínquo* (1st ed. 2021), and *Tempo e Tradução* (1st ed., 2017), along with translations of authors such as Goethe, Heine, Storm, Rilke, and Celan, attest to his pivotal role in rethinking how translation functions as a cultural and epistemological practice. He is presently completing a translation of Thomas Mann's *Lotte in Weimar* into Portuguese. As we begin this interview, we have the opportunity to hear his insights on the ethical, aesthetic, and philosophical dimensions of translation — a conversation sure to inspire and inform both seasoned scholars and emerging voices in the field.

Q: For our readers who are unfamiliar, can you describe the current state of translation and philosophy in Brazil today?

A: To start, it's important to recall that the very act of speaking about the relationship between translation and philosophy inevitably brings with it a positional problem: we always speak from a certain place. Either as philosophers engaging with the question of translation — where the term "philosophers" already encounters the difficulty of bringing together, under the umbrella of "one" philosophy, positions as different as those of analytic philosophy and post-structuralist thought — or as translation scholars engaging with philosophy, where the label "translation scholars" also falls short, trying to unify what is a highly heterogeneous research field.

On one hand, we can say that there is indeed contemporary research in translation that engages directly with traditions of contemporary thought — this is the case in Brazil (I would count myself among many others listed below), as well as in places like Germany, if we consider the work of Dilek Dizdar. On the other hand, many strands within this same disciplinary field show little interest in building a meaningful dialogue with philosophical traditions — often because they're grounded in more application-oriented or methodological discourses. And we must also acknowledge that certain currents within Translation Studies seem less and less interested in theoretical foundations — focusing instead on pragmatic outcomes and sometimes neglecting research that engages philosophically.

This preamble already signals my own vantage point: I speak from a perspective within Translation Theory that is fundamentally concerned with the complexities of translation practice and phenomenon, especially as these intersect with the questions raised by contemporary thought. In the Brazilian context, this perspective is shaped by the convergence of two specific sources: (1) a practice of and reflection on literary translation (especially poetry), which is inseparable from the work of Haroldo de Campos (1929–2003); and (2) the institutionalization of translation research through the work of the theorist and comparatist Rosemary Arrojo.

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As one of the founders of the Brazilian and international poesia concreta movement in the 1950s, Haroldo de Campos was involved with the translation of poetry and its theoretical reflection from the beginning. In his landmark essay, *"Da tradução como criação e como crítica"* ("Translation as Creation and Criticism"), first presented in 1962, he outlined an epistemological stance deeply rooted in the idea of translating poetry as poetry – that is, in Portuguese. This led him to conceptualize poetic translation as recreation, or *transcriação* – an approach that, while not entirely anti-essentialist, definitely resists essentialist views of poetry and translation dominant in the 1960s and 70s.

Over four decades, Haroldo's theoretical work on translation was built through constant dialogue with a wide range of thinkers – from the modernist antropofagia tradition and European avantgardes to Ezra Pound's integration of poetry, critique, and translation, and extending through engagements with Roman Jakobson, Octavio Paz, Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, and others. This critical-theoretical lineage has left a deep mark on numerous Brazilian scholars who have explored the intersection of literature, translation, and philosophy – think of names like Márcio Seligmann-Silva, Susana Kampf Lages, Evando Nascimento, Marcos Siscar, and Marcelo Jacques de Moraes.

Haroldo's translation praxis – from Homer and Dante to Mallarmé, Mayakovsky, Pound, and Ungaretti, not to mention the Bible, classical Chinese poetry, and Nô theater – founded a new mode of poetry translation in Brazil. Today, to translate poetry often means to write something that is itself a poem in Portuguese. This approach, one I fully endorse, has deeply shaped the majority of poetry translators in Brazil since the 1960s. On another front, Rosemary Arrojo – beginning her work in the mid-1980s at UNICAMP – was central in building a theoretical-critical strand of Translation Studies in Brazil grounded in contemporary thought. Her work, strongly influenced by Derrida, psychoanalysis, post-colonial and gender studies, created a space for theorizing translation beyond purely linguistic concerns. Arrojo's influence catalyzed a generation of researchers committed to deconstructing essentialist views of translation – views deeply embedded not only in common sense but also in academic traditions. Her legacy can be seen in figures like Cristina Carneiro Rodrigues, Maria Paula Frota, Lenita Rimoli Pisetta, Viviane Veras, and many others. While we can't say that Arrojo's interventions fully dismantled essentialist frameworks in Brazil, they certainly introduced epistemological tensions that still resonate. In fact, this coexistence of perspectives makes the Brazilian scene somewhat distinct from other national contexts, where the dialogue between translation and deconstruction has been more episodic. This is also where we locate the growing interest in the intersection between translation and philosophy in Brazil.

Q: How do you view the relationship between translation and philosophy — what has changed in your perspective, and what still needs to change?

A: As I've already hinted, I believe both philosophy and Translation Studies stand to gain a great deal from a more sustained and fertile engagement with one another. But for that to happen, we need to go beyond a merely instrumental conception of their relationship.

Translation, when seen only as a tool, already plays a role in philosophical work. The real challenge lies in recognizing that translation is not just a tool — it is also a question in and of itself, something that conditions philosophical thinking. This is especially clear in the work of figures like Derrida, who saw translation as central to philosophical inquiry rather than incidental.

Conversely, in Translation Studies, we can observe that the more we understand translation not as a strictly linguistic operation but as something entangled with relational questions at the core of the human condition, the more we naturally feel the pull toward dialogue with philosophical traditions. It becomes obvious that translation is not only about language — it is about how we relate to alterity, ethics, and knowledge itself.

Q: Your work often highlights the relational nature of translation. How do you see translation as a mediation between not just languages, but epistemologies and worldviews?

A: It's important to remember that all thought — no matter how abstract — emerges through a specific language. In this regard, Portuguese provides a fortunate condition: the word "relação" encompasses a broad and rich semantic field of relationality.

While Portuguese does offer specific synonyms for different types of relation (social, economic, political, etc.), we can still use "*relação*" idiomatically to refer to all of them. We talk about "*relações*" that are logical, mathematical, spatial, affective, diplomatic, ecological, ethical, epistemological, and so on. In English, French, or German, this semantic field is fragmented across multiple terms. The unity offered by "*relação*" opens up an important philosophical possibility.

So when we think of translation from this perspective, "relação" doesn't just mean a link between two systems — it signals mediation itself, and everything we associate with the experience of engaging with an "other." Translation is a logical relation, yes, and a linguistic one — but it is also, inescapably, a poiesis: a labor of relating to difference. It is not just about equivalence — it's about a lived relationship with alterity.

Q: In what ways has your engagement with Brazilian literature and philosophy shaped your understanding of translation as a relational practice?

A: My view of translation as relational practice can't be framed solely in national terms. Yes, it's rooted in the literary translation practices of figures like Haroldo de Campos and Augusto de Campos. And yes, it's influenced by the theoretical work of Rosemary Arrojo. But just as importantly, it's the product of my direct engagement as a translator with the poets I translate — Paul Celan stands out here — and of my ongoing dialogue with thinkers such as Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-Luc Nancy. The relationality I speak of is not confined to Brazil; it emerges through these transnational, philosophical, and poetic conversations.

Q: Do you think relationality in translation can be theorized beyond language — extending into affect, politics, or even materiality?

A: I believe I've already addressed that in the previous answer. In short: absolutely. The relational work of translation touches every dimension of the human — emotional, political, ethical, and material — not just the linguistic.

Q: Many of your writings suggest that translation is not a secondary act, but a primary philosophical event. Could you expand on this idea?

A: Let me highlight two key elements here. First is Derrida's notion that translation is not just a linguistic matter, but a philosopheme — a site of philosophical meaning and disruption.

Second is what some call the Levinasian turn, which involves a reversal of philosophical order: instead of ontology (being) as first philosophy, ethics takes precedence. In this view, relations — especially relations with others — are not second-order; they are foundational. We are not first individuals who then enter into relations. Rather, it is from relation that individuals emerge.

Applying this to translation, we can't keep thinking of it as a secondary, instrumental activity that merely connects already-defined elements (languages, cultures, texts). Translation must also be seen as a constitutive practice — it helps generate and shape those very elements.

This is also why I see the debate over untranslatability not *merely* as a technical issue, but as one rooted in this difference between viewing translation (instrumentally) as a tool and viewing it (constitutively) as a relational poiesis — a world-forming encounter with alterity.

Q: That is an interesting observation. As I discovered while working on my thesis, Paul Celan has been accused of untranslatability more than any poet in recent memory. From your experience of translating Celan into Portuguese, would you be able to say how this experience impacted your views on untranslatability?

A: Reading and translating Celan is indeed a formative experience. The accusation of untranslatability — which is not far from the charge that his poetry is obscure — is usually associated with a certain perception that his poetry is difficult to read. Celan reacted very strongly to this kind of criticism, counteracting it with his view that poetry is "constitutively" obscure — from which we could infer that it is "constitutively" untranslatable, which by no means (and it's important to make this very clear!) implies that it is impossible to translate it. On the contrary: it is precisely for this reason that it is imperative to translate it!

This means, for example, that Celan's poetry projects itself in the opposite direction to a poetic regime organized around the values of legibility and clarity, strictly reduced to the declarative domain of communication, to the assumption of an unproblematic passage to meaning. Celan's poetry also speaks with its silences, its cuts, its discontinuities, its suspensions. Celan's poetry is what it is by virtue of what it also represents as a form of dramatizing the issues it deals with — as human dramas, which are also always (and inevitably) dramas of language and in language.

It's also worth remembering that Celan was a prolific translator of poetry. And it was precisely in the context of poetic translation that he argued (in a letter to René Char) that "one should never claim a total understanding of the other," which would only be a form of disrespect for what is unknown (untranslatable) in the other. Learning to read and to translate the other (two forms of relationality) is also learning to deal with the untranslatability of the other. So the translator Celan himself already suggests the distinction I referred to in my answer above.

Q: Do you see affinities between translation and philosophical concepts like difference, repetition, or becoming?

A: Absolutely. If we think of *difference*, *repetition*, and *becoming* as relational figures — and I do — then the affinities with translation are obvious.

But whether those affinities can be productively developed in translation theory depends on how we define these concepts. Take "difference" and "repetition," for example: they can be read through essentialist frameworks, or, in contrast, through the Derridean notions of *différance*, *iteration*, and *déconstruction* — which radically transform how we understand repetition and meaning.

So yes, the connection is there, but we need to tread carefully and be precise about our conceptual lenses - starting, needless to say, with notions such as "translation" and "*relação*".

Q: How do you navigate the challenge of translating Brazilian thought into global discourse without flattening its specific historical and cultural nuances?

A: Any translation — especially of theoretical work — involves transformation. That's intrinsic to relational processes. But some transformations are more productive than others.

Take the translation of Haroldo de Campos' poetics and thought into English. In many cases, his work has been reduced to just one of its foundational influences: *antropofagia* (the modernist "cultural cannibalism" movement). While this is important, such a reduction ignores the crucial roles of Pound, Jakobson, Benjamin, and even Derrida in shaping his thought.

Thankfully, a new generation of scholars is pushing back against this flattening. I recall, for instance, a paper by Gabriel Borowski on the subject. And I'm currently working alongside Álvaro Faleiros (USP) on a project to translate a set of Brazilian critical essays on Haroldo's work into English. The goal is precisely to illuminate the plurality of matrices informing his thinking.

Now, if these translations flatten, simplify, or erase the other's singularity, then yes — they're stigmatizing. But if they arise out of an encounter that truly engages the other's alterity, then they can be productive transformations.

At this point, allow me to answer your question with a question:

What happens when we try to translate the Portuguese word "*relação*" into English? The challenge is that in Portuguese, the term fluidly embraces logic, emotion, space, power, kinship, ethics — all

under one word. In English, "relation" might sound stiff or abstract; "relationship" too specific or emotional. But is the challenge of translating the concept of "*relação*" only to be understood as a way of sacrificing its nuances in terms of reductions, simplifications, and flattenings? Precisely in the face of these "*intraduisibles*", shouldn't we feel compelled to translate more creatively, more inventively – to take up *productively* the transformative character of translation?

This, to me, is where translation becomes not only a philosophical act but an ethical one.

Q: Do you think there's a need for a more robust theorization of translation from the Global South? What might that framework look like?

A: Without a doubt, yes. But for that to happen, we must confront and undo the current regime of monoglossia — the idea that only knowledge expressed in English deserves global circulation.

We need to shift from a logic of "we'll only read you if you write in English" to "we'll read you because what you have to say matters — no matter the language."

Only then can truly plural epistemologies emerge — and only then can translation move beyond asymmetrical power structures toward a more reciprocal, multivocal exchange.

Q: Given the transnational flows of literature and theory, what role does translation play in shaping intellectual traditions beyond national boundaries?

A: As I mentioned earlier, translation shouldn't be seen as something that merely transmits pre-existing ideas — it constitutes intellectual traditions. It shapes how thought travels, mutates, and gains meaning in different contexts.

Translation is not neutral transit; it is *world-making*.

Q: Your translations and scholarship deeply engage questions of ethics. How do you see the ethical dimension of translation manifesting in practice?

A: In line with what I said earlier, I'll put it simply: Translation is the ethical dimension of my work.

There is nothing I do as a translator that doesn't involve an intense, complex, and sustained relationship (*relação*) with the other. And that relationship is always shot through with alterity, responsibility, and care.

This isn't an external ethical code I apply to my work — it's internal. Ethical relation is what translation *is*.

Q: In your contribution to *Philosophy's Treason* (2020), I found this line particularly striking: "Does the contemporary state of Translation Studies (across its various branches) really allow us to speak of one real object, one unequivocal subject of inquiry?" Has the emergence of AI changed your thinking on this?

A: Not really. The field of Translation Studies has always been epistemologically diverse. Despite the fact that we use the same word — "translation" — to refer to our objects of study, the term can signify practice, process, product, or relation (*relação*). Each branch builds its own methodologies, often importing frameworks from other disciplines.

This heterogeneity is not a flaw — it's a strength. And we shouldn't forget that.

Now, as for AI: I don't think it will fundamentally alter this internal plurality of the field. But I do believe AI will have a massive impact on text production and translation — especially in contexts where the text is formulaic, predictable, or conventional.

That's not where my work lives — but it's still something we need to reckon with.

Q: Are there particular projects, thinkers, or works you believe deserve more attention in translation today?

A: Any translation thinking that opens itself to the questions raised by contemporary thought deserves more attention.

This means not only translating "what is difficult," but also translating difficulty itself — translating that which resists flattening, that which interrogates, that which creates friction.

Q: What emerging trends in Translation Studies excite you? Where do you see the field heading?

A: What excites me most is any critical work that interrogates the relational reason — that is, the logic of relationship — that underpins translation as both theory and practice.

But to be honest, I'm not particularly optimistic about the future of the field. The kind of theoretical inquiry I find most urgent — one that engages with contemporary philosophy and relational thought — is being pushed to the margins. It has less and less space in the global discourse.

Still, if there's any hope for meaningful innovation, I believe it will come from opening the field — opening it to other disciplines, other epistemologies, and other cosmologies. The future lies in radical relationality, not disciplinary enclosure.