

## A shock to the system: the automation of literary translation

Professor Dorothy Kenny



### Abstract

Since the 1940s, scientists have sought ways to automate translation, but for most of this time literature remained largely untouched by their efforts. Generally accepted features of literary texts—including their intrinsic creativity and formal complexity—complicated their computational processing, and their cultural importance and long shelf life made them a less obvious target for automation than other highly perishable texts. Literary translators, for their part, held a special status among translators, even if their cultural capital was not always matched by economic reward, and literary studies provided one of the richest veins of theorizing about translation, often championing hermeneutic approaches.

Over the last decade, however, things have changed. Advances in machine learning and evolving business practices have led to increased automation in literary translation. We are now witnessing: widespread instrumentalization of literary texts as training data for machine translation and generative AI, rapid expansion of computationally oriented investigations of literary texts, and unprecedented mobilization of literary translators' organizations as they scramble to protect translators' intellectual property, to defend the practices of human translation, and to stay abreast of technological change. Meanwhile, translation theorists are now engaging more actively with technology and technologists are beginning to draw more on translation theory. In this presentation I address these changes, asking how translation studies might continue to respond to the shock of automation.

## Bio

**Dorothy Kenny** is full professor of translation studies at Dublin City University (DCU), Ireland. She holds a BA in French and German (translation with interpreting) from DCU and an MSc in machine translation and a PhD in language engineering, both from the University of Manchester. Her current research interests revolve around corpus-based studies of translation and translator style, the relationship between artificial intelligence and literary translation, and approaches to the teaching of translation technology. Her publications include the edited volumes *Machine translation for everyone: empowering users in the age of artificial intelligence* (Language Science Press, 2022; also available in Chinese translation by Xinyi Zhong and Hong Wenjie, 2025), *Fair MT: towards ethical, sustainable machine translation* (a special issue of *Translation Spaces*, coedited with Joss Moorkens and Félix do Carmo in 2020) and *Human Issues in Translation Technology* (Routledge, 2017), as well as numerous book chapters and articles in journals such as *Meta*, *Perspectives*, *Tradumàtica*, and *Translation Spaces*. She is co-editor with Joss Moorkens of the journal *Translation Spaces* and an Honorary Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Linguists (UK).