

Philosophy in the Modern Islamic World

Scholarly Network

Philosophy, the Political, and Politics of Translation in the Modern Islamic world

International conference organized
by the scholarly network *Philosophy in the Modern Islamic World*

Berlin, 10-13 March 2025

Philosophers read, think and write in various languages, and so do scholars and intellectuals who are engaging with their works. Translation is an integral part of the philosophical praxis. It often plays a decisive role in the shaping of concepts, the emergence of philosophical currents and the construction of arguments. Translation is an active process of understanding, adapting and embedding in the conceptual framework to which the translator contributes. This framework, in turn, is simultaneously influencing the very activity of translation and is altered by it. Hence, translation in the philosophical praxis has a political dimension that goes beyond the individual choices of a translator and is embedded in the historical formations of knowledge cultures. For philosophers in the MENA region, the question of translation is particularly important due to the multilingual characteristics of the field, the praxis and its actors, the colonial imprint on epistemological and linguistic formations associated with languages, and the tension between the perceived necessity to participate in European and American philosophical discourses and—and at the same time—doing justice to local discourses.

Historically, processes of translation in the MENA region have a very rich and long-standing significance, in modern times they became an important source of inspiration since the middle of the 19th century until today. Due to the rise of Western power, the translation of the Islamic tradition and Western modernity acquired a particularly political dimension in the sense of conflicting strategies and archives for translation. Who translated what and how?

How did translation interact with local archives of knowledge and how did these archives develop by way of translation?

Translating philosophy, therefore, demands a meticulous reflection of the way the philosophical source and target languages interact and have interacted during a long colonial history of voluntary as well as forced translations (Charkabarty 2000, 2014; Asad, Dixon 1985; Liu 2019). It oscillates between the acculturative translation integrating the translated work smoothly into the target language and culture, on one hand, and the alienating translation that displays the otherness of the translated work, on the other (Schleiermacher). Going beyond this dichotomy, current translation studies focus on the process of translation and are increasingly reflecting the translation of translation theories itself and juxtaposing its practice with its theory (e.g. *Reflexive Translation Studies*, ed. by Silvia Kadiu, 2019). Furthermore, one can also witness a mutual interaction between translation studies and philosophy (e.g. *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Philosophy*, ed. Rawling, Wilson, 2018). How do philosophers in the MENA region and those engaging with their works theoretically ground the translation and how is this mirrored in their praxis?

Translation itself raises philosophical questions. Philosopher-translators have written extensive prefaces in which they—besides outlining rather technical questions such as the ones regarding source text, translation theory and terminological choices — explore the nature and

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meaning of translation itself. Walter Benjamin in his eminent essay “The task of the translator” (“Die Aufgabe des Übersetzters”), published as a preface to his translation of Charles Baudelaire’s *Tableaux Parisiens*, argues against an essentialism of both source and target languages and holds that, inspired by the work, translation alters the conceptual and semantic fields of the target language and brings it closer to perfection; Mīr Shamsaddīn Adīb-Soltānī, in his Persian translation of Kant’s *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* alters the target language by introducing new words for Kantian technical terms build from Middle-Persian roots and justifies this and other translation strategies in his introduction. Fathi Maskini in his award-winning Arabic translation of Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit*, borrows from Heidegger the slogan: “*Sage mir, was du vom Übersetzen hältst, und ich sage dir, wer du bist*”. / „قل لي ما موقفك من...“ and poses translation as such as a philosophical problem that concerns the concepts itself, but also the possibilities and limits of language in general and specific languages in particular as well as their relation to the things expressed by concepts. Hence, translation functions as stimulus for a development to higher forms of philosophical thinking. In addition, the philosophical approach to translation can also critically review existing translations in the light of conceptual possibilities offered by local archives. A conscious recognition of such archive of knowledge and language can enable a socio-politically informed perspective on concept formations and, thereby, question an understanding of translation, that takes it merely as a linguistic process. With this broad approach, a wide range of social and political phenomena can be reflected by means of a philosophy of translation, including the phenomena that seemingly defy translation. In this conference, we are especially interested in phenomena of translation that – besides the linguistic dimension – touch upon the political.

The history and politics of translation are also a central aspect of culture. In other words, “culture is translation”, as proponents of a *translational turn* put it (Bachmann-Medick 2006). Thus, the migration of ideas, concepts, and arguments—and also of persons—along with their

transformation according to local historical contexts is the given of philosophy as an intellectual and cultural practice. The various cultural or contextual framings of concepts/ideas and narratives in which they are embedded are a crucial part of the ways in which meaning is shaped in philosophical reasoning. Taking this into account results in a more context-sensitive understanding of this practice.

The techniques, the philosophy, the contexts and the history of translating philosophy must all be placed in the zone of the political. Why did certain word choices for certain concepts prevail, why were specific texts translated and in what cases did only a translation from or into a particular language grant the translated text intellectual recognition? The results were usually not merely a matter of historical coincidence. Rather particular *politics of translation*, promoted by institutions and funding practices or the ever-changing intricate layers of intellectual discourses and the politics of knowledge have to be considered in order to better understand how the phenomenon of translating philosophy is related to various power structures both in the MENA-region as well as globally. Given the political dimension of all translation, the question about our own involvement into the politics of translation, and, along with it and in line with the *scopos* theory, the question about the goals of our own translations have to be posed: For whom do we translate? What is the purpose of our own translations of philosophy in the MENA region? What is our motivation to translate?

The international conference will address the following aspects:

- (1) Concepts in translation: How are historical difference and identity constructed through (cultural) translation? How do we deal with the problem of particularity versus universality, the local versus the global in the study of concepts in translation? How do historical relations and power differentials between source and target languages influence terminological choices in the translation of concepts?
- (2) Translation as a historical phenomenon between European languages and languages of the MENA

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region, but also between languages of the MENA region: What is the translation history of a particular work or philosophical current? How is translation inflected by the dimension of the political? How did translation interact with local archives of knowledge and how did these archives develop by way of translation?

(4) Translations and teaching: How are philosophical works translated for the classroom and what are lacunae in this translation process? How are translations used in various scenarios in the classroom and how is their

political dimension addressed? What are good examples of such translations and why?

(3) Reflection of the practice of translation / “philosophy of translation”: How do translators expand on this issue in their introductions to translations and how do scholars discuss the issue of translation philosophically? How do we reflect ourselves on theory, practice and meaning of translation in our renditions of philosophical works? What are the philosophical implications of particular translation choices?

Practical information

We are looking for contributions to these but also related aspects of philosophy, translation, and the political. We especially encourage researchers in early phases of their academic career to apply. Please send your proposed abstract (max 300 words) and short CV for review until 25 August 2024 to the conveners of the conference Roman Seidel and Kata Moser to the email address conference25@philosophy-in-the-modern-islamic-world.net. The decision will be communicated until Mid-September 2024.

Travel and accommodation expenses for contributing participants will be covered by the organizers. The official conference language is English, contributions in other languages are possible if the contributor has at least a passive command of English and provides a written English translation to the organizers 4 weeks ahead of the conference.

Timeline:

- 24.06.2024 call for papers
- **25.08.2024 deadline for proposed abstract (max 300 words) with CV**
- 15.09.2024 communication of the decision
- 10.02.2025 deadline for the English translation for contributions in other languages
- 10.-13.03.2025 conference

Organizer:

Scholarly network Philosophy in the Modern Islamic World (based at Ruhr-Universität Bochum). This network aims at further developing a newly emerging research field in the German-speaking as well as international academic landscape. In the four years of funding by the DFG (2021-2025), transdisciplinary perspectives are explored in order to sustainably establish research and teaching in the field in constant exchange with colleagues from the MENA region. For more information on the network and its activities, visit <https://philosophy-in-the-modern-islamic-world.net>.

We are looking forward to your proposal.

Roman Seidel (Ruhr-Universität Bochum) and Kata Moser (Universität Göttingen)
on behalf of the Network *Philosophy in the modern Islamic world* in June 2024