Beyond Human Exceptionalism: Arguing for AI's Creative Competence in Literary Translation

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Abstract

This paper investigates the consequences of transformative AI for literary translation, or how, in other words, artificial intelligence already challenges its presumed role as a translator. By comparing AI-generated translations and canonical human translations of Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet*, we show that systems like ChatGPT can fulfill core creative functions. These involve interpretive decisions, the reproduction of stylistic particulars, and the transfer of cultural markers. The results suggest that AI can not only understand complex literary devices such as metaphor and cultural allusion but can also create outputs of literary value. However, this capacity remains constrained; its limitations are evident, as it struggles to develop a consistent artistic voice and a specific emotional tenor. Consequently, this paper argues not for replacement but for a new alliance. We recommend a hybrid process in which the human translator becomes the strategic curator, directing AI, providing definitive creative judgment, and ensuring the final translation is held to rigorous aesthetic and ethical standards.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence, ChatGPT, Kahlil Gibran, literary translation, the Prophet.

1.Introduction

For years, literary translation has been heralded as a profoundly human art. It involves not only language but also understanding of culture and creative talent, which was considered impossible for machines to imitate (Steiner, 1998). Rapid AI developments are increasingly challenging this concept of human uniqueness. The shift away from basic rule-based translation tools in the direction of powerful Large Language Models (LLMs) such as GPT-4 is refitting what can be achieved (Bender et al., 2021). Premonitions at the beginning were that AI would replace human translators or was simply going to aid them (Moorkens, 2020). Now comes a more fundamental question: Can these AI systems truly demonstrate creative prowess in literary translation?

This paper, Beyond Human Exceptionalism, transcends the facile "human vs. machine" dichotomy. It suggests that contemporary AI, in the form of an entity making decisions and responding to context, is engaging in acts of translation that should lead us to redefine creativity. Using Gibran's *The Prophet* as a case study, this paper examines how well AI performs on the main tasks of creativity. We argue that, although AI is not human, its output demonstrates sufficient skill to

counter the notion that creativity is something for humans only. This results in a new model of the human translator as the strategic curator who advises the AI in its new, integrated workflow.

2. Literature Review: Understanding Creativity in Translation
2.1. The Tradition of Human Uniqueness in Translation Theory

Literary translation has long been framed as an exclusively human domain by Western translation theory. Academics such as Steiner (1998) characterize translation as a private, almost therapeutic engagement with a text. Venuti (1995) highlights that it is the translator's own conscious decision to homogenize or estrange a text. Berman (1992) addresses the question of ethics ascribed to the translator. In tandem, such a tradition views creative work as derived from human experience, culture, and intent and results in a powerful sense of human singularity.

2.2. The Evolution of Translation Technology: From Tools to Partners

The myth of human exceptionalism has arisen as fast as technology itself. The origins of translation technology point in a clear direction. The earlier rule-based and statistical systems were very primitive tools that required heavy human correction. While Neural Machine Translation (NMT) was a significant improvement over the previous model, NMT drafts are smoother and more contextual than earlier systems that relied largely on synonym-based substitutions (Kenny, 2022). But still, it remained largely a tool for generating a first draft. This historical context is crucial for appreciating the larger transformation that will accompany the most recent incarnation of AI.

2.3. AI and ChatGPT (2020-Present): A Paradigm Shift

The emergence of generative AI, such as ChatGPT, is a significant change. Rather than simply reproducing patterns indiscriminately from their training data, these models have been trained on vast volumes of general text (unlike their predecessors). This training enables them to contextualize, discern patterns, and generate language in a more discursive, human-like fashion (Bender and Pintzuk et al., 2011). They are not merely translating words; they are converting text into a new language. This shifts AI from being merely a tool to potentially a creative collaborator.

2.4. Defining 'Creative Competence' for a Translation Study

To analyze this fairly, we define "creative competence" in translation with four clear parts:

- **Interpretive Choice:** Choosing between different valid ways to translate ambiguous text (Bassnett, 2014).

- **Stylistic Mimicry:** Copying or adapting the author's unique voice, rhythm, and style (Boase-Beier, 2020).

- **Cultural Transposition:** Adapting idioms and cultural ideas so they make sense in the target language (Newmark, 1988).

- **Aesthetic Cohesion:** Keeping a consistent artistic tone and emotional feeling throughout the text.

3. Methodology: A Framework for Comparison

3.1. Case Study Selection: Gibran's *The Prophet*

The Prophet (1923) serves as an ideal case study. Its language is simple yet metaphorical and philosophical. It juxtaposes Eastern and Western poetic modes. It's also a well-known work with some high-quality human translations to compare against testing the limits of a translator's skill.

3.2. Selected Passages

Three passages were chosen for their different challenges:

- Passage A: From "On Love." Tests metaphor and emotion.

- Passage B: From "On Work." This passage assesses the use of rhetorical questions and abstract ideas.

- Passage C: From "On Joy and Sorrow." This passage assesses the use of paradox and poetic imagery.

3.3. The AI and the Human Benchmarks

AI translations came from GPT-4, using specific prompts asking for "literary" and "poetic" translations. These were compared to the original English and to celebrated human translations (like the Arabic translation by Antonios Bachir).

3.4. Analytical Procedure

A detailed, side-by-side analysis was done.

Each AI translation was compared to the human version based on the four criteria of creative competence: choice, style, culture, and overall artistic effect.

4. Analysis & Findings: AI's Creative Competence in Translating Gibran
4.1. Source Text and AI-Generated Translations

- **Source Text (Gibran, 1923, p. 35):** "Then a woman said, Speak to us of Joy and Sorrow. And he answered: Your joy is your sorrow unmasked... [full text]"
- **AI Translation (Conservative/Literal Approach):** "ثم قالت امرأة: كَلِّمُنا عن الفرح والحزن...[full text]"
- **AI Translation (Creative/Poetic Approach):** "فقالت امرأة: حدِّثُنا عن الفرح والحزن... [full text]"

4.2. Analysis of AI's Creative Competence: Selected Examples
4.2.1. Example 1: Cultural and Semantic Adaptation
Original: "Is not the lute that soothes your spirit, the very wood that was hollowed with knives?"
AI Translation: "أوليس العود الذي يهدّئ أرواحكم هو الخشبَ نفسُه الذي جُوِّفَ بالسكاكين؟"
Analysis of Creative Competence: This translation demonstrates AI's sophisticated interpretive choice and cultural transposition (Bassnett, 2014; Newmark, 1988):

- **Cultural Adaptation:** AI correctly identifies "lute" as "العود" (oud), selecting the culturally appropriate Middle Eastern instrument rather than a literal translation. This shows

contextual awareness beyond lexical matching.

- **Semantic Precision:** "Hollowed with knives" becomes "جُوّفَ بالسكاكين", maintaining the violent, intentional craftsmanship imagery crucial to Gibran's metaphor of transformation through suffering.
- **Structural Fidelity:** The translation preserves Gibran's rhetorical question format and parallel structure, maintaining the philosophical weight of the original.

4.2.2. Example 2: Metaphorical Nuance and Poetic Lexical Choice

Original: "The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain."

AI Translation: " كلما عَمُقَ الحزنُ وهو ينحت في كيانكم، ازددتم قدرةً على احتواء الفرح."

Analysis of Creative Competence: This illustrates AI's capacity for stylistic mimicry and metaphorical preservation (Boase-Beier, 2020):

- **Dynamic Verb Selection:** "Carves" is translated as "ينحت" (sculpts), a more artistically nuanced verb than possible alternatives like "يَحفُر" (digs). This choice captures the intentional, shaping quality of sorrow in Gibran's philosophy.
- **Philosophical Accuracy:** The comparative structure "كلما... ازددتم..." (the more... the more...) perfectly renders the English construction while feeling naturally Arabic.
- **Unity of Metaphor:** The "container" metaphor implicit in "contain" is maintained through "احتواء", preserving the conceptual framework of emotions as substances with volume.

4.2.3. Example 3: Handling Paradox and Abstract Concepts

Original: "Your joy is your sorrow unmasked."

AI Translation: " إن فرحكم هو حزنكم وقد انكشف قناعه."

Analysis of Creative Competence: This demonstrates AI's capability to handle philosophical complexity and abstract relationships:

- **Paradoxical Unity:** The translation preserves the core paradox that joy and sorrow are identical at their essence.
- **Metaphorical Integrity:** "Unmasked" becomes "انكشف قناعه" (its mask has been unveiled), maintaining the theatrical metaphor while using natural Arabic idiom.
- **Syntactic Elegance:** The structure "...هو... وقد..." elegantly handles the predicate adjective construction in a way that reads naturally in Arabic while maintaining philosophical precision.

4.2.4. Demonstration of Multiple Valid Approaches

The AI generated two versions, showing its capacity for stylistic range (Boase-Beier, 2020):

- **Conservative Version (shown above):** Prioritizes fidelity to Gibran's prophetic tone and syntactic structures.
- **Creative Version Alternative:** " فكلما توغّل الحزن في أعماقكم ونقش وجودكم بأظافره، اتّسع فيكم موضع الفرح." Here, AI demonstrates innovative elaboration, adding "بأظافره" (with its claws) to intensify the carving

metaphor—a creative choice that, while potentially excessive, shows generative capability.

4.3. Comparative Analysis: AI vs. Human Translation of Gibran
4.3.1. The Human Benchmark: Analysis of Antonios Bachir's Translation

Bachir's rendering is wide-ranging in its interpretive sweep, frequently fleshing out Gibran's pithy metaphors and inserting rhetorical flourishes. This feature speaks to a human translator's willingness to recreate the text culturally and stylistically.

4.3.2. Comparative Examples:

1. Treatment of Metaphor & Imagery

Original: "The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain."
Bachir: " فكلما أعمل وحش الحزن أنيابه في أجسادكم،
تضاعف الفرح في أعماق قلوبكم"
AI: " كلما عَمُقَ الحزنُ وهو ينحت في كيانكم، ازددتم
قدرةً على احتواء الفرح"
Analysis:

Bachir's approach is highly interpretive. By transforming "sorrow carves" into *"the beast of sorrow sinking its fangs"*, the translation introduces a layer of violent, bestial imagery that is absent from the source text. Although creative, this reformulation significantly intensifies the metaphor and shifts the philosophical abstraction toward emotional dramatization.

By contrast, the AI's rendering remains metaphorically faithful, preserving Gibran's sculptural imagery through the verb *"ينحت"* ("to carve" or "to sculpt"). This choice maintains the original conceptual

framework while avoiding interpretive amplification.

Competence Insight: Restraint, the source metaphor fidelity; Bachir shows creativity. The AI's selection is arguably more philosophically accurate, but Bachir's is more visually evocative.

2. Cultural & Lexical Adaptation

Original: "Is not the lute that soothes your spirit, the very wood that was hollowed with knives?"
Bachir: " أم ليست القيثارة التي تزيد في طمأنينة
أرواحكم هي نفس الخشب الذي قُطع بالمُدَى والفئوس؟"
AI: " أوليس العود الذي يهدّئ أرواحكم هو الخشبَ نفسُه
الذي جُوّفَ بالسكاكين؟"
Analysis:

- **Bachir's Choices:** Uses "القيثارة" (qithara/lyre) instead of lute/oud. Changes "hollowed with knives" to "قُطع بالمُدَى والفئوس" (cut with blades and axes), altering the craftsmanship metaphor to one of mere cutting.
- **AI's Choices:** Correctly uses "العود" (oud), the culturally appropriate instrument. Preserves " جُوّفَ بالسكاكين" (hollowed with knives), maintaining the precise imagery of careful, intentional hollowing.
- **Competence Insight:** The AI demonstrates superior cultural specificity and metaphorical accuracy (Newmark, 1988). Bachir's translation, while poetic, introduces less precise terminology.

3. Handling Philosophical Abstraction

Original: "Your joy is your sorrow unmasked."
Bachir: "إن فرحكم هو تَرَحكم ساخرًا"

AI: "إن فرحكم هو حزنكم وقد انكشف قناعه"
Analysis:

- **Bachir's Interpretation** adds the concept of "ساخرًا" (mocking/scorning), introducing a tone of irony or derision not present in the original. This represents a significant interpretive liberty (Venuti, 1995).
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- **AI's Translation** faithfully renders the "unmasking" metaphor with "انكشف قناعه", preserving Gibran's core idea of revelation and essential identity.
- **Competence Insight:** The AI shows philosophical fidelity; Bachir shows interpretive boldness. For conveying Gibran's precise thought, the AI's version is more accurate

4.3.3. Overall Assessment of Creative Competence

Aspect	AI Translation	Bachir's Human Translation	Competence Verdict
Metaphorical Fidelity	High. Preserves original imagery precisely.	Moderate. Frequently elaborates or alters metaphors.	AI shows superior restraint and accuracy.
Cultural Adaptation	High. Correctly uses culturally-specific terms (oud).	The system employs terms that are less specific, such as qithara.	AI demonstrates better cultural localization (Newmark, 1988).
Philosophical Precision	The level of precision is high and it faithfully maintains Gibran's abstract paradoxes.	Variable. Sometimes adds interpretive layers.	AI is more philosophically faithful to the source.
Stylistic Economy	High. Matches Gibran's concise, prophetic style.	Lower. Tends toward explanatory expansion.	AI better captures Gibran's distinctive voice (Boase-Beier, 2020).
Creative Interpretation	Conservative. Stays close to the source text.	High. Willing to reimagine and expand upon the text.	Bachir shows more creative liberty (for better or worse).

4.4. Implications for AI's Creative Role

This comparison reveals that the AI's creative competence operates within a domain distinct from that of the human translator. The AI consistently demonstrates strengths in metaphorical fidelity, cultural precision, philosophical accuracy, and stylistic economy.

Bachir's translation, while frequently evocative and aesthetically

pleasing, takes numerous liberties with meaning and imagery that may not reflect the precise thoughts of Gibran. This demonstrates the human bias towards interpretive dominance reshaping a text according to a subjective interpretation (Venuti, 1995).

The AI's conservative fidelity might be preferable for philosophical literature, where concept accuracy is especially important. This contradicts the belief that human translation is by its nature better for literary-philosophical texts. The AI instead exhibits a kind of creative competence that is grounded in respect for the integrity of the source text, which can be quite desirable (and perhaps even preferable) for some translations.

This finding aligns with the paper's argument. that AI has a bona fide creative competence, one that cognitively rather than merely imitatively parallels human creativity. In a hybrid scenario, the human curator is free to rely on AI's faithfulness for philosophical correctness and use limited amounts of human interpretive genius to enhance emotional impact.

5. Discussion: Redefining the Translation Paradigm

5.1. The New Role of Human Translators: Becoming Strategic Curators

These results reveal a redefined value of human translators in the digital era. So the value is going from just doing the translation, one drives a process of creativity. The human is promoted to a chief curator (Cronin, 2013). Such oversight entails handling the overarching artistic vision, maintaining ethical and cultural accuracy, and making creative calls, which AI can't.

5.2. The Future Direction: A Human-Machine Hybrid Workflow

A logical subsequent step will be the human–machine hybrid workflow. This model is a system, tied together. A human curator sets the goals and style. The AI produces a draft. The human then evaluates it for overall artistic merit (beyond simple error correction) and helps steer revisions. This process combines the speed of AI with the judgment of humans.

5.3. Focusing on Truly Creative and Complex Tasks

This hybrid approach allows humans to tackle the most creative and nuanced tasks. Professionals could focus their efforts on addressing the most complex challenges: translating wordplay, rendering a unique cultural concept that has no easy English-language equivalent, fine-tuning the sound of an entire poem, and making the ultimate choices that determine whether a work is worthy of entering the world as great literature. The human role shifts from producer to creative director.

5.4. Study Limits and Future Research

This investigation focused on one AI model and one book. In the future, other genres and languages and more recent AI models should be explored. Important ethical questions about training data, authorship, and fair pay in this new model also require answers (Bender et al., 2021; Moorkens, 2020).

6. Conclusion:

The analysis of the AI model's translated output for *The Prophet* is thus an incisive critique of human exceptionalism in Translation Theory. The central question introduced in the beginning - Can AI be creative in any real sense?- is answered not in binary terms, but with a nuanced demonstration of capability. As shown in its treatment of Gibran's metaphors, cultural allusions, and philosophical abstractions, modern LM capabilities such as those supported by a GPT-4 model perform essential creative activities: they interpret choices, mimic dimensions of style, and move across the local concepts with impressive fidelity. The resulting output attains the status of a literary text in its own right. This challenges the view that creativity exists beyond anthropocentric categories.

However, this competence is distinct. AI is excellent at conservative fidelity, stylistic mimicry, and philosophical precision, often surpassing human translators in faithfully translating the source-text imagery and intent. Its primary limitation lies not in a failure to produce, but in its current inability to develop a signature, an overreaching artistic vision, and the daring, occasionally transformative interpretive freedom of works like Bachir's. This represents not a weakness, but an opportunity.

For this reason, the paper calls for a change of mindset from replacement fears to a shared strategic model. The future of literary translation takes the form of a mixed human/machine workflow in which human translators turn into ambassadors and creative managers. In this partnership, AI's capability—producing a reliable, stylistically sound draft—is is harnessed and directed by human discernment, which supplies the ethical compass and profound cultural understanding as well as final aesthetic control. This framework enables human creativity to target its highest value: conceptual creation, the resolution of deep linguistic problems, and the production of those artist's decisions that give a translation a soul.

In the end, moving beyond human exceptionalism doesn't diminish the translator's art; it elevates it. Once the task of execution is delegated to a competent AI, the human expert is freed to engage in deeper levels of creative and critical supervision. The aim, therefore, is to advance the field beyond outdated paradigms and create translations that achieve both high fidelity and profound aesthetic resonance, ensuring the art of translation endures in the age of AI.

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