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Untranslatable Ecologies: Rethinking Ecotranslation from Postcolonial Margins

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Abstract

This article argues that ecotranslation from postcolonial Asian margins must begin from untranslatability, not as a failure to be repaired but as an ethical condition shaped by colonial and digital regimes of legibility. Reading Michael Cronin's *Eco-Translation* and Hu Gengshen's *Eco-Translatology* through a decolonial lens, it proposes (E)co-translation as a cooperative, care-based orientation for translating vernacular ecologies without flattening them into Anglophone equivalence. Conceptually, it traces how 'Plantationocene translation' links translation to extractive infrastructures (publishing markets, policy templates, platform translation, and the energy-intensive circuits of machine translation) that reward speed and readability. It then develops a set of practical decision points—borrowing and glossing, paratextual accountability, multimodality, and community review—through which opacity, ecoambiguity, and slow violence can be carried across without being domesticated. The argument is offered as a theory-in-progress, grounded in selective illustrative cases, and aimed at institutional sites where translation mediates environmental knowledge: publishing, policy, and NGO reporting.

Keywords: untranslatability, vernacular ecologies, ecoambiguity, opacity, ecosystemic translation, cultural specificity, slow violence

Introduction

The unfolding environmental crises of the Global North, from extractive mining frontiers to climate-ravaged floodplains, demand new forms of ecological response and new modes of listening.[1] These crises are at once material, linguistic and cultural, where the meanings of loss, resilience, and justice are continually translated, often mistranslated, across languages, epistemologies, and worldviews. The very vocabulary through which such ecological crisis is articulated is never neutral, but mediated by histories of empire, science, and global capital.

Ecotranslation,[2] an emerging concept at the intersection of ecology and translation studies, offers a way of engaging these entanglements. It asks how ecological meaning is conveyed, transformed, and sometimes silenced as it moves across linguistic and cultural

[1] Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Harvard University Press, 2011), https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674061194; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (University of Chicago Press, 2021), https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226733050.001.0001.

[2] Michael Cronin, *Eco-Translation: Translation and Ecology in the Age of the Anthropocene* (Routledge, 2017), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315689357.

borders.[3] Much of the eco-turn in translation studies has been articulated through Euro-American and settler-colonial debates, where both environment and language are often framed through familiar western epistemes.[4] This article shifts the focus to Global South, and to postcolonial Asia in particular, where an ecological crisis unfolds amid enduring colonial afterlives, multilingual realities, and uneven regimes of visibility.[5] In these contexts, translation is inseparable from the politics of representation and the ethics of care.

In this article, 'Asia' does not name a homogeneous cultural unit, but a set of uneven translation ecologies shaped by colonial language regimes, internal hierarchies (national, regional, and minoritised languages), and differential access to digital infrastructures. 'Global South' is used as a geopolitical-economic analytic that names the ongoing concentration of extraction and risk, not a stable cartography. 'Postcolonial margins' names a power relation: sites where ecological knowledge is expected to become legible to external institutions, often in English, under conditions not of their choosing.

Michael Cronin's *Eco-Translation* remains foundational to this discussion. Cronin calls for an 'ecosystemic' understanding of translation, proposing that translation sustains 'ecosystems of communication' just as biodiversity sustains ecosystems of life.[6] Yet the norms most rewarded in transnational circulation—equivalence, speed, readability, and an implicit Anglophone centre—sit uneasily with postcolonial translation ecologies. Cronin's examples tend to circulate within European languages and Global North Anthropocene debates; when the framework is carried into postcolonial Asia, its ethical insights remain useful, but its institutional blind spots become more visible. In multilingual nations marked by colonial histories, environmental discourse often arrives through the coloniser's tongue,[7] and local ecological knowledges are routed through gatekeeping infrastructures (publishers, policy templates, and platform translation) that privilege scientific rationality and global readability over vernacular specificity.[8] As postcolonial scholars have long noted, the flow of information remains asymmetrical. Western academia and policy rarely engage sources in Asian languages, while Asian scholars bear the burden of translating local epistemes into global idioms.[9] Such one-way translation 'predictably and dangerously reiterates colonialist dynamics' in knowledge production.[10]

Even when motivated by inclusivity, Eurocentric models of ecotranslation often reduce difference to data. They focus on making environmental content accessible, through multilingual glossaries, readable reports, or globally digestible climate slogans, without

[3] Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (Verso, 2013).

[4] Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (Routledge, 2010), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203498170.

[5] Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide* (Paradigm Publishers, 2014).

[6] Cronin, *Eco-Translation,* 45–46.

[7] Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, 1986.

[8] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'The Politics of Translation,' in her *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (Routledge, 1993).

[9] de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide*, 188–90.

[10] Simon C. Estok, 'Reading Ecoambiguity: Review Essay on Karen Laura Thornber's Ecoambiguity: Environmental Crises and East Asian Literature,' *Ecozon@* 4, no. 1 (2013), https://doi.org/10.37536/ECOZONA.2013.4.1.518.

questioning the epistemological violence of such smoothing. Cronin himself cautions against translations that 'read well' at the expense of what he calls the 'source's cultural habitat.'[11] To translate ecologically, he insists, is to sustain the context, cadence, and ethical texture of the original, even if that means preserving opacity or difficulty for the target audience.[12] Translation becomes a practice of ecological care rather than commodified communication.

This concern also resonates with non-western theoretical currents, particularly Gengshen Hu's *Eco-Translatology*,[13] which conceptualises translation as a process of adaptation and selection within an ecological system. Therefore, to explore ecotranslation from the postcolonial margins, the following parts will first clarify the related yet distinct concepts that converge under its umbrella: Eco-Translation, Eco-Translatology, and (E)co-Translation. Each arises from different intellectual traditions and theoretical ambitions, and the distinctions between them illuminate the trajectories of ecological thought in translation studies across global contexts. I then turn to the praxis question by reading Plantationocene translation as a historically sedimented regime of commensurability that resurfaces in global publishing, policy writing, and platform translation. The later sections examine three linked sites where untranslatability becomes visible in practice: equivalence as a norm, global environmental discourse as a lingua franca, and Anglophone narrative frameworks that reward closure.

Michael Cronin's *Eco-Translation* is the broadest framework. For Cronin, Eco-Translation encompasses all forms of translation that engage consciously with the crisis of human-induced environmental change. He insists that translation studies cannot remain insulated from the ecological turn reshaping the humanities, and that the discipline must embrace a post-anthropocentric identity attuned to nonhuman life and material limits.[14] Rooted in what he calls a 'political ecology of translation,' Cronin's framework orients itself around the principles of place, resilience, and relatedness.[15] It asks how translation might contribute to planetary survival: how it participates in shaping our responses to food security, climate migration, or biodiversity loss.[16] Crucially, Cronin extends translation beyond human language into what he terms the tradosphere, the totality of translational processes across species and systems, encompassing 'the signing activity of all living matter, and perhaps even non-living matter.'[17] Translation, in this view, becomes a planetary phenomenon, a field of interrelations that exceeds human intention. Yet Cronin's approach is not merely cosmological; it is also critical. He identifies in contemporary translation practice a complicity with the ideology of infinite growth, particularly through technological localisation and the infrastructure of high-speed digital translation, that ties linguistic exchange to extractive energy use.[18] Eco-translation, therefore, calls for restraint: for 'low-tech' or 'slow' translation

[11] Cronin, *Eco-Translation*, 55.

[12] Cronin, *Eco-Translation*, 56.

[13] Gengshen Hu, *Eco-Translatology: A Framework for an Ecological Approach to Translation* (Springer, 2020), 25, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-2260-4.

[14] Cronin, *Eco-Translation*, 3–5.

[15] Cronin, *Eco-Translation*, 17.

[16] Cronin, *Eco-Translation*, 23–24.

[17] Cronin, *Eco-Translation*, 87.

[18] Cronin, *Eco-Translation*, 99–101.

practices that counter the consumption bias of cyber-utopianism and reimagine communication as a form of ecological accountability.[19]

Where Cronin's theory is planetary and critical, *Eco-Translatology*, the Chinese school that developed in parallel, uses ecology more as a metaphor for translation's internal dynamics than as a call for environmental praxis.[20] Conceived by Hu Gengshen and others, Eco-Translatology (ET) approaches translation as an ecosystem of adaptation and selection. Its central formulation envisions the translator and text as organisms adjusting to their eco-environment, which includes textual, cultural, and community ecologies. The goal is to achieve holistic adaptation and system stability, a translation that fits harmoniously within its surrounding context. However, this engagement with ecology is primarily analogical rather than environmental. Ecology here becomes a structural metaphor, offering a vocabulary for describing translation's equilibrium rather than its ecological footprint.

ET's preference for 'holistic adaptation' and 'system stability' can also sit comfortably with institutional expectations of harmony, making it necessary to read the framework critically when dealing with colonial and state power. In what follows, I retain ET's attentiveness to context and relationality while refusing any depoliticised notion of equilibrium.

Between Cronin's materialist ecology and Hu's metaphorical ecosystem lies the emergent framework of (E)co-translation proposed here as a heuristic for praxis. This formulation absorbs Cronin's ecological imperatives but situates them within a decolonial and collaborative orientation. The parenthetical '(E)' signals a double movement: the 'eco' that links translation to ecology, and the 'co' that foregrounds cooperation, community, and care. (E)co-translation thus defines itself as a communal practice that honours entanglement—of languages, species, and histories—and regards translation not as an act of mastery but as a form of refuge-tending. It imagines the translator as caretaker rather than conduit, attending to the fragility of meaning across worlds. By embedding Cronin's ecological ethics within collective modes of work, (E)co-translation also keeps in view the economic and political dimensions of translation labour: the precarity of translators, the invisibility of their contributions, and the need for solidarity-based structures.

At the same time, (E)co-translation inherits from Eco-Translatology a respect for system balance and context, but it redirects that sensibility toward *justice* rather than harmony. The concern is not for stability within a translational ecosystem but for equity within a damaged world-system. If Cronin's Eco-Translation urges us to think ecologically, and ET invites us to think adaptively, (E)co-translation demands that we act collectively.

Put plainly, (E)co-translation names the work that neither Eco-Translation nor Eco-Translatology can do on its own: it treats untranslatability as a power problem and an institutional problem, not merely a semantic one. It foregrounds translation as cooperative labour (consent, reciprocity, co-authorship, community review) and as infrastructural mediation (publishing, policy, NGO reporting, platform translation) where legibility is rewarded and friction is penalised. It also offers a pragmatic decision logic: when to borrow and gloss, when to build paratext, when to preserve opacity, and when clarity must take precedence because stakes are high.

[19] Cronin, *Eco-Translation*, 103–4.

[20] Hu, *Eco-Translatology.*

The praxis of decolonial ecotranslation

To write from the postcolonial margins, one must begin by acknowledging translation's deep complicity in empire. Translation was never a neutral bridge; it was, as many historians have shown, one of the central technologies of conquest.[21] The colonial project depended on a system of mediation that rendered difference legible, measurable, and ultimately exploitable.[22] What I call *Plantationocene translation* captured this ethos, a mode governed by the logic of commensurability, which sought to make everything convertible into a single scale of value.[23] It extracted meaning from its relational contexts in much the same way that plantations extracted crops from ecosystems, stripping them of interdependence and complexity. This translation practice excised human and nonhuman labour alike, reducing them to inputs for imperial and capitalist circulation.

In practical terms, Plantationocene translation is visible in the routine genres through which environmental knowledge travels: when local terms for land, kinship, and obligation are translated into policy categories ('ecosystem services,' 'stakeholders,' 'resources'); when NGO reporting templates compress testimony into predefined boxes; when Anglophone editors smooth vernacular cadence into a recognisable 'world literature' style; and when platform translation and machine translation scale legibility through energy-intensive infrastructures whose material costs remain anchored in extraction. These are institutional chokepoints where untranslatability is most often treated as noise and where a decolonial ecotranslation must make its interventions.

Translation theory itself bears the sediment of this history. The European tradition consolidated power around the figure of the singular author and 'his' obedient translator.[24] By representing translation as an act of solitary fidelity, it aligned with patriarchal and clerical hierarchies, the church, the state, the family, that prized authority and obedience.[25] The translator's craft was refigured as service, the translator's agency domesticated into a form of labour performed for someone else's signature. This historical reification of equivalence and mastery, translation as a precise mirror, obscured the collective and processual nature of linguistic mediation. To translate from the postcolonial margin, therefore, is to resist this legacy of excision. The aim is not tokenistic diversity or the celebration of plurality as spectacle, but the recovery of translation as an *embodied process* lived in the bodies, tongues, and temporalities of those who have long endured asymmetrical translation as a daily condition. Against the illusion of transparent equivalence, postcolonial ecotranslation insists on porousness, hesitation, and situatedness, on an ethics of listening rather than mastery.

This critical practice must also confront how the aesthetic logic of equivalence continues to shape the global literary market. As translators have observed, the drive toward 'legibility' in Anglophone publishing imposes a homogenising rhythm: 'a novel by a woman in

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[21] Tejaswini Niranjana, *Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism, and the Colonial Context* (University of California Press, 1992), 1–3, https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520911369.

[22] Vicente L. Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society under Early Spanish Rule* (Duke University Press, 1993), https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822396437.

[23] Donna J. Haraway, 'Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin,' *Environmental Humanities* 6, no. 1 (2015), https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3615934.

[24] Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (Routledge, 1995), 1–5.

[25] Lori Chamberlain, 'Gender and the Metaphorics of Translation,' *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 13, no. 3 (1988), https://doi.org/10.1086/494428.

Palestine begins to resemble, in the feel of its prose, something by a man in Taiwan.'[26] Such flattening transforms world literature into a monocrop, replicating in linguistic form the agricultural monocultures that erase biodiversity. What emerges is an epistemic monoculture, an economy of style and affect designed for consumption rather than encounter. Translation becomes a tool of assimilation, a device that smooths friction and ensures compliance, rather than a site of relational difference.

In the digital era, this extractive infrastructure persists under a new guise. High-tech translation platforms and machine learning systems enact a dual form of extractivism: linguistic and material. The dream of translating the entire web for free, championed by cyber-utopian projects, rests on immense energy consumption and the mining of rare metals. The very circuits that enable instantaneous multilingual exchange depend on cobalt, lithium, and coltan extracted from scarred landscapes in the Global South. This is translation's new plantation; an immaterial economy whose smooth interfaces conceal networks of exploitation.

To translate from this position is to recognise that language work, like land work, is care work, slow, sustaining, and communal. (E)co-translation thus understands the making of literature and the making of life as intertwined acts of tending: to the text, to the community that speaks it, and to the broader ecological refuges that make such speaking possible. It reimagines translation as a small but vital gesture within a care-centred economy, an economy that values repair over extraction, reciprocity over competition. At its most urgent, (E)co-translation becomes a tool for building refugia: spaces, material or imaginative, where languages, species, and people can coexist and renew their bonds. These refugia are zones of encounter, porous and alive with incommensurability. To translate in this mode is to welcome friction rather than erase it, to allow meaning to proliferate rather than settle. Messiness, in this sense, is a refusal of the imperial compulsion toward equivalence and transparency that once justified conquest and continues to underwrite global publishing and platform translation. It acknowledges that the world is plural, textured, and resistant to flattening. In this sense, (E)co-translation aligns with Indigenous Place-Thought, which insists that thought is inseparable from the land that grounds it, and that relation, not representation, is the proper measure of knowledge.

At the same time, messiness is not inherently emancipatory. In disaster warnings, legal testimony, or land-rights documentation, ambiguity can produce harm or be weaponised. (E)co-translation therefore does not celebrate opacity as a posture in the abstract; it argues for graduated opacity and accountable paratext: retaining key vernacular terms and relational textures while providing layered explanation when stakes demand it.

The work must also hold open the possibility of transformation beyond the text. By resisting the enclosure of languages into intellectual property regimes and rejecting the border regimes maintained by major polluters, (E)co-translation helps cultivate seedbeds for hypothetical worlds to come. Each act of translation, when performed with care, plants the potential for a different way of living together, a counterweight to the extractive systems that have exhausted both people and planet. The translator here is not the compliant hand of the phalanx that enforces assimilation, but part of an answering chorus, one that works toward futures sustained by shared responsibility rather than solitary ambition. To translate in this way is to translate with the grain of life itself: slowly, attentively, in communion, and to decolonise translation, then, is to refuse this lineage of equivalence and extraction. It means

[26] Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, 183.

acknowledging that translation has always been material, that every act of linguistic mediation carries ecological weight.

Beyond 'Lost in Translation': When ecological meaning is untranslatable

It is common to say some nuance was 'lost in translation.' But here I propose a stronger claim: in postcolonial environmental contexts, ecological meaning is often rendered untranslatable by dominant norms of communication. Three factors are especially insidious: (1) the norm of linguistic equivalence, (2) global environmentalist discourse, and (3) Anglophone narrative frameworks. Each deserves examination.

Conventional translation practice, shaped by centuries of bilingual dictionaries and fidelity debates, assumes that for any important term in one language, there *should* be an equivalent in the other. If no single word exists, translators often coin one or use a descriptive phrase. While this works fine for many technical terms, it falters for culturally embedded concepts. Environmental vocabulary is full of terms that carry cosmological or ethical weight in one language and have no peer in another. Consider the concept of 'Nature.' The English term 'nature' (often capitalised in global discourse) carries Enlightenment baggage—a sense of an external wilderness or a universal essence separate from humans. By contrast, across several Asian linguistic and philosophical traditions, there has not been a stable, universalised category that maps neatly onto capital-N Nature as an external realm set apart from humans. In classical Chinese, for example, there was no word exactly equivalent to 'Nature' as independent wilds; people spoke of 'heaven and earth' (tiān-dì) or the 'myriad things' (wànwù) to denote what we might call the natural world.[27] The modern Chinese term *zìrán* (自然而然), now used as the default translation for nature, originally meant 'the self-so' or the way things unfold spontaneously—a concept rooted in Daoist philosophy that *included* human society as part of its order.[28] Only under influence from western thought in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries did *zìrán* acquire its current meaning as an objective environment.[29] Similar stories abound: Japanese *shizen* (自然) was adapted to mean nature,[30] Vietnamese thiên nhiên (lit. 'heavenly nature') was coined under Chinese influence, and so on.[31] What this shows is that seemingly straightforward translations can mask deep cosmological mismatches. When a global report proclaims 'we must protect Nature,' non-western audiences nodding along may not actually share a single understanding of what 'nature' is. Many indigenous languages don't even have an abstract noun for nature—they

[27] Zhongjiang Wang, 'How the Concept of "Nature" Emerged and Evolved in Modern China,' *Cultura: International Journal of Philosophy of Culture and Axiology* 15, no. 2 (2018). 13–15, https://doi.org/10.3726/cul.2018.02.02.

[28] Jing Liu, ''\What Is Nature? – *Zìrán* in Early Daoist Thinking,' *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 15, no. 4 (2016), 327–28, https://doi.org/10.1080/09552367.2016.1215060.

[29] Wang, 'How the Concept of "Nature" Emerged,' 20–22.

[30] Federico Marcon, 'Without Nature: Thinking about the Environment in Tokugawa Japan,' in *Rethinking Nature in Japan: From Tradition to Modernity*, ed. Bonaventura Ruperti, Silvia Vesco, and Carolina Negri (Edizioni Ca' Foscari, 2017).

[31] Layna Droz et al., 'Exploring the Diversity of Conceptualizations of Nature in Vietnam,' *Humanities & Social Sciences Communications* 9 (2022), https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-022-01186-5.

refer to specific landscapes, beings, or elements.[32] For instance, some Pacific Island languages distinguish various kinds of land and sea in exquisite detail but lack an umbrella term for 'environment.'[33] Forcing a translation to adhere to the English norm (singular, capital-N Nature) imposes an alien framework and potentially discards the 'aspects that are difficult to grasp'—those nuanced indigenous understandings of land, sea, and life. The point here is not to claim a single Asian or Indigenous ontology, but to show how translation norms built around singular equivalents can hide the very differences that matter.

The following example from Sámi Norway is offered comparatively. It shows how untranslatability is produced when Indigenous ecological relations are forced into state and policy categories, a dynamic that can also be observed in other Indigenous and minoritised translation contexts, including parts of Asia. Liv Østmo and John Law describe a conflict between Sámi fishers in Norway and state conservation policies.[34] The Sámi concept of jávredikšun refers to a set of practices and moral relations through which people care for lakes and fish populations—involving offerings to water spirits, restraint in harvesting, and rituals of respect. Norwegian (and English) have no equivalent word; the closest might be 'lake stewardship,' but that fails to capture the spiritual and communal dimensions. In translation, jávredikšun *disappeared*—it was rendered invisible in policy discourse that spoke of 'resource management' and 'conservation' in a nature-culture dualist framework.[35] The upshot was that environmental regulations (catch limits, fishing bans) were imposed in ways that undermined Sámi practices rather than complementing them. Østmo and Law pointedly note the political significance of refusing translation in such cases.[36] By *not* translating jávredikšun—by insisting on using the Sámi word in discussions with policymakers—Indigenous activists forced acknowledgement that something distinct was at stake, something the state's categories couldn't fully encompass. This tactic of strategic untranslatability is equally relevant in Asia, where local terms for ecological relations (be it the Filipino *kapwa* ethos of interconnectedness, the Sanskrit idea of *prakriti*, or the Aboriginal Australian *Country*) hold deep meanings not conveyed by generic terms like *environment*. Rather than dilute these concepts into bland approximations, ecotranslation would favour borrowing or glossing: letting the indigenous word stand and explaining it on its own terms. As Édouard Glissant famously asserts, every community has a 'right to opacity'—a right *not* to have its entire being transparent or reducible to outsiders' terms.[37] Translational equivalence must sometimes yield to opacity, which 'underscores that everything about people cannot be understood completely and in conventional ways.'. Embracing opacity means accepting that a translated text may contain elements the target audience simply has

[32] Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Milkweed Editions, 2013), 55–59.

[33] International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), '5 Indigenous Words about the Environment That Don't Exist in English,' *IFAD,* 8 August 2022, https://www.ifad.org/en/w/explainers/5-indigenous-words-about-the-environment-that-don-t-exist-in-english.

[34] Liv Østmo and John Law, 'Mis/translation, Colonialism and Environmental Conflict: The Case of the Sámi Fishers,' *Environmental Humanities* 10, no. 2 (2018), https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-7156782.

[35] Østmo and Law, 'Mis/translation, Colonialism and Environmental Conflict,' 360.

[36] Østmo and Law, 'Mis/translation, Colonialism and Environmental Conflict,' 365.

[37] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (University of Michigan Press, 1997), 189.

to sit with, uncomfortably or in wonder, without immediate full comprehension. This is not a failure; it reflects reality.

Strategic untranslatability, however, is not risk-free. Refusal can be read as gatekeeping, can invite exoticisation, or can be rejected outright by institutions that equate clarity with credibility. It can also exclude allied publics who do not share the language. For that reason, (E)co-translation treats non-translation as one tactic among others, best paired with layered explanation: glosses that do not collapse the term into an 'equivalent,' translator's notes that disclose what is at stake, and where possible, community review over what may be translated, how, and for whom.

Beyond the norms of linguistic equivalence, the modern environmental movement has also generated its own lingua franca, with terms like 'sustainable development,' 'biodiversity,' 'carbon footprint,' 'ecosystem services,' and so forth. Many originated in English and have been disseminated worldwide as loanwords or through translation. These terms are incredibly useful for coordinating international action and shared metrics. However, they can become double-edged swords. On one hand, a term like 'climate change' (*changement climatique*, *cambio climático*, etc.) provides a common reference for a planetary phenomenon. On the other hand, the dominance of global terminology often overshadows local idioms and explanations. In postcolonial regions, global environmentalism can act almost as a new imperial language, unintentionally replicating what one might call 'green colonialism.'[38] For example, when international NGOs frame an issue in a rural Asian village as a matter of 'biodiversity conservation,' they might translate the local concerns into that framework—perhaps translating villagers' talk of medicinal plants and sacred groves into the language of 'ecosystem services' and 'protected areas.'[39] While not wrong, something gets *lost*. The villagers might see the forest as an ancestor or as part of their community (relations imbued with duty and reciprocity), whereas 'ecosystem services' frame it as a provider of benefits (a more transactional view). Scholars have noted that English-centric environmental discourse can create an illusion of universal agreement, masking how differently societies relate to nature.[40] Indeed, a 2021 analysis found over 96 percent of sources in major global biodiversity assessments (like IPBES reports) were in English—a staggering bias given the wealth of ecological knowledge in other languages.[41]

This epistemic dominance not only marginalises non-English knowledge; it risks misapplying solutions. As Layna Droz and colleagues argue, global sustainability reports must include diverse voices and conceptualisations of nature to make better decisions that are acceptable and effective locally.[42] Solutions imposed with monolingual assumptions can misfire. For instance, conservation policies that designate 'wilderness' areas for protection

[38] James Fairhead, Melissa Leach, and Ian Scoones, 'Green Grabbing: A New Appropriation of Nature?' *Journal of Peasant Studies* 39, no. 2 (2012), https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2012.671770.

[39] Sharachchandra, Lele, Oliver Springate-Baginski, Roan Lakerveld, Debal Deb, and Prasad Dash, 'Ecosystem Services: Origins, Contributions, Pitfalls, and Alternatives,' *Conservation and Society* 11, no. 4 (2013), https://doi.org/10.4103/0972-4923.125752.

[40] Tatsuya Amano et al., 'Languages Are Still a Major Barrier to Global Science,' *PLOS Biology* 14, no. 12 (2016), https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pbio.2000933.

[41] A. J. Lynch et al., 'Culturally Diverse Expert Teams Have Yet to Bring Comprehensive Linguistic Diversity to Intergovernmental Ecosystem Assessments,' *One Earth* 4, no. 3 (2021), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.oneear.2021.01.002.

[42] Droz et al., 'Exploring the Diversity of Conceptualizations of Nature in Vietnam.'

might clash with local communities who have sustainably used that land for centuries and don't consider it 'wild' at all. If those communities articulate their relationship to the land in, say, Indigenous terms of kinship or stewardship, translating their stance into the global discourse (which expects talk of rights, services, or economic value) can distort the rationale. An ecotranslational approach would advocate bidirectionality: not only translating global concepts down to the local language (to inform communities) but also translating local environmental concepts up to global forums.

Moreover, global environmentalism often comes packaged in a particular affective register—urgency, optimism, or doom-and-gloom—that may not align with local affective realities.[43] The narrative of a 'planetary emergency' might not resonate with communities for whom the crisis is highly localised (e.g. a river dying) or entangled with social injustice (e.g. pollution tied to ethnic marginalisation).[44] Translating local testimonies into the global activist idiom can strip out expressions of grief, spiritual loss, or even ambivalence. As Thornber's notion of ecoambiguity reminds us, people can have mixed feelings—grief at environmental loss, anger at imposed solutions, hope in traditional practices, and resignation to change, all at once.[45] These mixed feelings often don't translate neatly into the rallying cries or funding proposals that global environmental discourse prefers. A truly sensitive ecotranslation would not sanitise such ambivalence. For example, if a farming community expresses both resentment towards a new wildlife sanctuary (for restricting their access) and reverence for the animals being protected (due to cultural beliefs), a typical report might cherry-pick one side (either the conflict or the reverence) to craft a clear message. An ecotranslational write-up, by contrast, might narrate the situation in a more dialogic manner, perhaps quoting a farmer's conflicting statements verbatim and leaving the tension evident. This again ties to resisting the drive for clarity at all costs. The expectation of clarity in global discourse can be a form of epistemic violence, essentially demanding that subaltern voices speak in a single tone. But as Shannon O'Lear notes, slow violence often results from 'epistemic and political dominance of particular narratives or understandings.'[46] Challenging that dominance may involve injecting plurality and ambiguity into the translated narratives that circulate globally.

Beyond specific terminology, there is the broader issue of narrative style. Anglo-western storytelling conventions—whether in journalism, academic writing, or literature—have preferences. There is a penchant for individualism (heroic activists, tragic victims), for the dramatic arc (a clear beginning, crisis, and resolution), and for explicability (the text should not leave readers confused or dissatisfied). Here 'the Anglophone reader' should be understood less as an individual and more as an institutional figure: publishers, peer reviewers, funders, NGO reporting frameworks, and policymakers who reward genres of

[43] Mike Hulme, *Why We Disagree about Climate Change: Understanding Controversy, Inaction and Opportunity* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511841200.

[44] Ursula K. Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 21–27; Max Boykoff, *Who Speaks for the Climate? Making Sense of Media Reporting on Climate Change* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 6–8, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195335637.001.0001.

[45] Karen Laura Thornber, *Ecoambiguity: Environmental Crises and East Asian Literatures* (University of Michigan Press, 2012), https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.3867115.

[46] Shannon O'Lear, 'Climate Science and Slow Violence: A View from Political Geography and STS on Mobilizing Technoscientific Ontologies of Climate Change,' *Political Geography* 52 (2016), 4–13, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2015.01.004.

evidence and story. Translation decisions are often shaped at this level through omission, substitution, and re-emplotment: local cosmology becomes 'cultural belief,' kinship-to-land becomes 'ecosystem services,' episodic testimony is tightened into a crisis arc, and open-ended accounts are rewritten to deliver closure. Naming these operations matters because (E)co-translation intervenes precisely here, through bilingual key terms, paratextual accountability, and the refusal to over-resolve.

Anglophone frameworks also tend to favour resolution. There is often pressure, especially in media, to end on a note of either hope (community adapts and overcomes) or clear call to action (urgent plea for change). However, many local narratives do not resolve so cleanly. They might express ongoing tension or unanswered questions—for example, a coastal community might be unsure whether to relocate or rebuild after repeated storms, oscillating between faith in their ancestral land and the pragmatic fear for their children's future. A translation that imposes a resolution ('villagers decide to stay and fight' or 'villagers admit defeat and leave') simplifies the reality. Embracing *untranslatability* here means allowing the open question to remain open in the translated text. This also aligns with Lawrence Venuti's idea of *foreignization*—deliberately preserving some foreign elements in a translated text to disrupt the target language's complacency.[47] Here, I argue for a similar ethos: *ecological foreignization*, one might call it, where translations of environmental issues deliberately carry the scent of their source culture's soil and story, rather than airbrushing it away.

Holding space for opacity and ambiguity: Towards an ecotranslation of resistance

If conventional translation is about making things transparent, ecotranslation as envisioned here is about knowing when to leave things opaque. Glissant, writing from the postcolonial Caribbean, championed opacity as a right—the right *not* to be completely understood on the coloniser's terms.[48] He cautioned that demanding transparency (through strict definitions and clarifications) often 'overlooks and discards aspects that are difficult to grasp.'[49] In our context, those 'difficult to grasp' aspects might be the spiritual reverence a community holds for a mountain, or the way a local language entwines moral judgment into the name of a river. Glissant's advice is to focus on 'the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components.'[50] In translation, this could mean conveying the *overall feel* and relational meaning of a concept rather than dissecting it into a facile definition. For example, instead of trying to find a direct equivalent for an indigenous term for a forest ecosystem that also implies home, sanctuary, and identity, a translator might retain the original word and surround it with descriptive context: 'their *dang se*—a word that means far more than 'forest,' encompassing a sacred refuge and ancestral home—is being logged and lost.' Here the readers encounter a foreign term, get a hint of its import, but are also put on notice that this concept doesn't neatly map to 'forest.' The opacity is partial—we invite the reader to understand *around* the term rather than through a one-to-one substitution.

[47] Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2008), 15–20.

[48] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 189.

[49] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 191.

[50] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 190.

Practically, the decision to preserve opacity can be made through a few questions. What are the stakes of misunderstanding (safety, legal rights, harm)? Who holds institutional power in the communicative situation (publisher, state, NGO, community)? Has consent been given for full disclosure, or are some knowledges protective or sacred? What genre is being translated (policy brief, testimony, literature), and what degrees of ambiguity can it carry? These questions do not yield a formula, but they help opacity function as an accountable practice rather than an aesthetic pose.

Opacity in translation is not about hiding meaning; it is about respecting complexity. It acknowledges, as Glissant says, that 'everything about people cannot be understood completely,' certainly not on first encounter or through a single translation. By allowing some opacity, we encourage the audience to learn and adapt, rather than expecting the source culture to do all the adapting. It is a gentle inversion of the usual power dynamic. In a typical translation scenario, the burden is on the source text (and thus the source culture) to make itself clear and palatable to the target audience. An ecotranslational approach, especially from the Global South to the Global North, shifts part of that burden back to the audience: the target audience may need to stretch its imagination, sit with ambiguity, and accept that some things are not immediately resolvable. This is, in effect, an ethical stance of decolonisation within translation. It aligns with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's idea that translators must surrender to the text's rhetoric and not domesticate it into familiar patterns. It also echoes the practice in postcolonial literature of code-switching and leaving indigenous words untranslated (think of Chinua Achebe leaving Igbo terms in *Things Fall Apart,* or Arundhati Roy weaving Malayalam and Hindi phrases into her English prose). In academic or policy writing, one can similarly incorporate the original terms for key ecological and cultural notions, with explanatory footnotes or glossaries if needed. The point is not to confuse but to assert the value of the original expression.

Opacity also has its own politics. If managed carelessly, it can become a prestige gesture that excludes the very publics most affected, or it can be aestheticised as 'exotic' difference. An (E)co-translational approach should therefore pair opacity with access: layered glossaries, translator's notes that disclose decision-making, and where possible, community review and co-authorship. The aim is not to mystify but to prevent premature capture.

Karen Thornber's work on ecoambiguity is also instructive here. Thornber examines East Asian literatures to reveal the 'complex, contradictory interactions between people and environments with a significant nonhuman presence.'[51] She uses ecoambiguity to describe how individuals and societies can love and venerate nature while simultaneously exploiting or harming it. These contradictions—far from being exceptions—are 'at the crux of a diverse array of environmental problems.'[52] For example, a rural community might depend on a forest for spiritual identity and livelihood yet participate in its logging because of economic pressures. Such ambivalent relationships defy the clear-cut hero/villain narratives that global environmental discourse often expects. Thornber notes that western ecocritical scholarship has tended to gloss over these ambiguities, seeking neat moral lessons or harmonious visions of 'people living peacefully with nature.'[53] Especially in postcolonial contexts, environmental values are often fragmented and in flux, shaped by colonial histories, rapid modernisation,

[51] Thornber, *Ecoambiguity*, 278.

[52] Estok, 'Reading Ecoambiguity,' 133.

[53] Thornber, *Ecoambiguity*, 26, 501–19.

and cultural beliefs. When these ambiguous experiences are translated for an international audience, there is a strong tendency to resolve the ambiguity—to present a clearer narrative that aligns with global expectations. This might mean flattening local nuance: portraying an Asian community as uniformly eco-friendly or victimised, or alternatively as ignorant destroyers, depending on the agenda. Thornber herself, in writing *Ecoambiguity*, faced the challenge of translating East Asian environmental texts for Anglophone readers. Simon Estok's review of her book observes that Thornber often assumes a western reader unfamiliar with Asian contexts, effectively casting East Asia as the 'Other' in need of explanation.[54] The very framing 'might surprise readers accustomed to conventional images of Asian ecological harmony' (as Thornber writes) as it unwittingly positions the western reader as normative. This highlights a subtle pitfall: even well-meaning efforts to introduce non-western eco-narratives can end up reaffirming a western-centric gaze if the translation *over-clarifies* or exoticises the source material.

What would it mean to translate ecoambiguity without erasing its contradictions? It would require translators and interpreters to resist the impulse to make the uncomfortable comfortable. Estok cites a real incident in Seoul—a man cutting down invasive acacia trees along a stream, explaining that the Japanese had planted them during colonial rule.[55] An observer unfamiliar with that history might see only unjustified tree-killing, missing the layers of nationalistic and ecological reasoning behind the act. To convey this story to an outsider, one could either simplify it ('local man removes harmful non-native trees') or delve into its ambiguities (the man's act is both destructive and restorative, entangled with historical trauma and ecological care). The latter approach burdens the translation with contextual exposition, potentially making it less punchy. Yet it is truer to the lived reality, where notions of harm and care blur. (E)co-translation, as we advocate here, would choose the slower, more contextual route—embracing dissonance over easy coherence. It would treat the untranslatable elements (the affective historical memory carried in a word like 'colonial acacia') not as problems to be solved, but as truths to be carried across in whatever way possible (through footnotes, parenthetical explanations, or even leaving terms untranslated).

Slow violence and ecoambiguity both demand narrative patience. They require storytelling modes that can manage incremental change, uncertainty, and internal contradiction. These modes often exist in vernacular traditions: for example, Indigenous oral histories may recount environmental change through diffuse, episodic narratives; rural folk songs might mix laments and celebrations about the land in one breath. Such forms are profoundly different from the linear, crisis-oriented narratives common in global climate journalism or conservation reports. Translating these vernacular forms into an op-ed or a policy brief is inherently fraught. Much is inevitably lost. But recognising this loss is the first step toward improvement. Rather than blithely assuming translation can or should achieve a seamless transfer, ecotranslation begins by interrogating what cannot be fully translated and why. In Rob Nixon's terms, part of combating slow violence is making it visible—and making it visible may require breaking the conventions of genre and language. A translated testimony of a slowly poisoning landscape might need to disrupt the reader's expectations, perhaps through fragmented structure or preserving local idioms that carry emotional weight even if the exact meaning escapes the foreign reader.

[54] Estok, 'Reading Ecoambiguity,' 135.

[55] Estok, 'Reading Ecoambiguity,' 132.

It also highlights regional vulnerability: colonial and postcolonial histories have made certain regions more vulnerable to environmental harm (through extractive economics, uneven development, and other things). Translation that ignores this and just speaks of 'vulnerable ecosystems' misses the human and historical dimension. A term like 'sacrifice zone,' used in environmental justice to denote areas devastated for the sake of economic progress, is a revealing example.[56] Media and NGOs increasingly label heavily polluted or stripped areas in the Global South as 'sacrifice zones'—conveying that these places and their people have been sacrificed to mining, industry, or even 'green' energy projects.[57] While evocative, this term can itself flatten local experiences. Anthropologists note that *sacrifice* implies a single, dramatic transaction, whereas affected communities experience a continuum from ignorance and uncertainty to gradual awareness and resistance.[58] In other words, no single term—whether 'sacrifice' or any other—can fully translate the range of subjective realities in a coal-mining town or a dam-flooded valley. An ecotranslational approach would use 'sacrifice zone' as a starting point (since it communicates globally recognised injustice), but would then contextualise it with local voices: perhaps quoting a resident who says 'we didn't know we were being sacrificed, we were told it was development,' and another who says 'now our land is a waste and we are the living sacrificed.' By weaving in these perspectives, the translation of the concept is enriched, and the inherent inadequacy of the term 'sacrifice' is made as clear to readers (as it was to those scholars). This honesty about the translation's limits paradoxically gives the audience a more accurate understanding than a polished, one-dimensional story would.

Conclusion

Foregrounding untranslatability is not a rejection of translation but a reorientation of its purpose in the encounter between global discourses and local lifeworlds. The model proposed here remains deliberately unfinished, a theory-in-progress that must adapt to context and remain accountable to those whose voices it carries. It refuses the idea of a universal environmental vocabulary ready for export and begins instead from the ground up, listening to how people on the margins articulate their ecological realities in their own idioms and allowing those terms to guide the process. Such an approach will inevitably produce hybrid forms: English interwoven with Indigenous words, policy recommendations framed by proverbs or myth, scientific data tempered by local cautionary tales. These translations may appear unconventional, yet they enact what Cronin calls a 'greater, more expansive dialogue with the Earth,' one that resists both anthropocentric and Anglocentric closure.[59] By leaving room for opacity and ambiguity, translation avoids the premature sealing of meaning and allows multiple truths, scientific, cultural, experiential, to coexist.

What this article redefines is not only the object of translation but the ethics that govern it. It treats translation as cooperative labour rather than solitary fidelity; it treats

[56] Steve Lerner, *Sacrifice Zones: The Front Lines of Toxic Chemical Exposure in the United States* (MIT Press, 2010), https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/8157.001.0001.

[57] Dayna Nadine Scott and Adrian A. Smith, '"Sacrifice Zones" in the Green Energy Economy: Toward an Environmental Justice Framework,' *McGill Law Journal* 62, no. 3 (2017), https://doi.org/10.7202/1042776ar.

[58] Ryan Juskus, 'Sacrifice Zones: A Genealogy and Analysis of an Environmental Justice Concept,' *Environmental Humanities* 15, no. 1 (2023), https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-10216129.

[59] Cronin, *Eco-Translation,* 150.

ecology as vernacular lifeworld and material infrastructure rather than a portable concept; it treats untranslatability as a constitutive condition rather than a problem to be solved; and it treats opacity as a strategic, criteria-bound practice rather than a romantic refusal. In these terms, (E)co-translation names a set of interventions at the institutional sites where environmental knowledge is most often flattened: publishing, policy drafting, and NGO reporting.

This reimagining does not romanticise opacity or confuse obscurity with depth. There will be moments when clarity is non-negotiable, when emergency communication must be direct and unambiguous. What matters is discernment, a translator's ethical capacity to balance transparency and fidelity to the source's habitat of meaning. Acknowledging that some ecological knowledge will remain untranslatable is not an admission of failure but a stance of humility. Glissant's reminder that 'opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics' captures this spirit: a global environmental consciousness made of many textures, where each thread keeps its colour even as it intertwines with others.[60]

To rethink ecotranslation from Asia's postcolonial margins is, finally, an act of environmental justice. It challenges the dominance of Anglophone universals and insists that the Anthropocene is not one story but many. By honouring what cannot be easily translated, the silences, sacredness, contradictions, and idioms of resilience, we recover ways of knowing that have long helped communities live with uncertainty, balance, and renewal. The hope is not for perfect comprehension but for coexistence: a translation practice as rich, relational, and resilient as the ecologies it seeks to serve. In this sense, (E)co-translation is less a finished theory than a collective task of 'making ready,' a slow weaving of solidarities for a more just and post-anthropocentric world.

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[60] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation,* 200.

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