Introduction

In 1823, August Wilhelm Schlegel (1767–1845), the German Romantic translator and literary critic, translated the 700-verse, sacred philosophical poem Bhagavadgītā (the Gītā) from Sanskrit into Latin (Schlegel 1823). The most well-known Hindu text in the west, the Bhagavadgītā is divided in 18 cantos as part of Mahabharata, one of the two greatest epics of ancient India. Dated from the first few centuries BCE, and traditionally ascribed to the sage Ved Vyasa, the Gītā is set in a narrative framework of a dialogue between Arjuna and his charioteer Krishna, who is no other than God Vishnu in his eighth human incarnation.\(^1\) The dialogue takes place just as the epic battle between the two kinships (Kauravas and Pandavas) is about to start. Looking at the vast expanse of the army, including his friends, cousins, and teachers, Arjuna has doubts about his moral right to carry on with the impending battle where he is to kill his relations. The Gītā is Krishna’s response to Arjuna’s doubts, where he exhorts him to stop hesitating and fulfil his mission as a warrior.

In 1824, the French Sanskritist Simon Alexandre Langlois (1788–1854) published a series of articles in Journal Asiatique vigorously criticizing Schlegel’s translation of this seminal Hindu text. Langlois’ biting review of Schlegel’s method of translation incited Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835) – an active translator, philosopher, statesman, and linguist – to support Schlegel first in his direct (and lengthy) response in the Indische Bibliothek (1826), and then in a formal pair of lectures to the Berlin Academy of Sciences (1825 and 1826). Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), another leading philosopher in the Berlin circles,
commented in detail on Humboldt’s view of the Indian poem in his newly founded journal, the *Jahrbücher für wissenschaftliche Kritik*. In this review, which happened to be Hegel’s first contribution to the journal, he not only criticized Humboldt’s views, but stated his own explicitly negative evaluation of the *Bhagavadgītā* and of Indian religious thought in general.

The various intercultural communicative aspects of this particular discussion have been treated by numerous German Indologists and comparative literature scholars alike from the Orientalist, Post-orientalist, and critically hermeneutic points of view. Their readings often describe Humboldt’s stand towards the *Gītā* as ‘Universalist’ and open to intercultural translation, thus supporting the canonization of non-European texts. Yet these scholars tend to understand Hegel’s insistence on the difference between Indian and European world views as being very much opposed to the possibility of an open hermeneutical dialogue via translation. Gipper (1986), Figueira (1994), Halbfass (1988), Marchignoli (2004), and most recently Herling (2006) generally see Schlegel’s translation through the lens of the ensuing debate between Humboldt and Hegel. All these scholars take the back and forth arguments between Langlois, Humboldt, and Hegel around the translation as their starting point, but they eventually tend to focus more on extrapolating Hegel’s severe criticism of the content of the *Gītā* in particular and Indian philosophy in general. As none of these treatments engage in critical analysis of Hegel’s comments on the technique of translation and its importance for translation theory, this chapter aims to address this gap in the literature.

When Schlegel translated *Gītā*, the modern German interest in the language and civilization of ancient India had reached its peak through the deliberate attempts of German Romantics, who sought to broaden their horizons of understanding about philosophy, literature, art, and the concept of humanity by looking at cultures other than the Greek and the Roman. The German interest in ancient Indian literature was flourishing in Germany, so much so that two academic branches were already established in Germany in the early decades of the nineteenth century: Comparative Linguistics and Indology, which then further prompted the systematic study of ancient Indian languages (mainly Sanskrit) and literature in Germany. During that period, acquiring copies of reference works to learn other languages, and Sanskrit in particular – from its foreign script to its subtler grammatical and lyrical nuances – was undoubtedly daunting. Yet many scholars, including the Schlegel brothers, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Franz Bopp, and Friedrich Rückert, followed