In their latest edited collection, Paul Standish and Naoko Saito nominate translation as a pressing philosophical and educational concern. With particular reference to the work of the American philosopher Stanley Cavell, they explore this idea with their characteristic insight and care, paying due attention to companion concerns of the ordinary, the transformative and the voiced.

A central touchstone of many chapters in the collection, and a point made explicitly in the editors’ introduction, is the idea that translation happens not only between languages but within language itself. Translation “permeates our life as a form of human transformation”, writes Saito, and “[v]ia language we are open to the possibility of undergoing the experience of transcendence in the ordinary” (14). Translation, then, is experienced within the native as well as the foreign. Capturing Cavell’s distinctive understanding of language as an inheritance that enables just as deeply as it disappoints, the process of translation is ordinary as well as transformative.

For Cavell, of course, this duality has its roots in scepticism – the characteristically human anxiety that we are constitutionally separated from those loved ones around us and that our attempts to communicate never fully breach this tragic gap. Cavell urges continually that this separation is to be acknowledged and worked through as we are compelled to constantly translate ourselves to each other. Nothing is straightforwardly given; deepest efforts must always be made.

Such preoccupations with language and communication, while rooted in the philosopher’s committed explorations of the importance of everyday speech as it emerges in the work of J.L. Austin and the later Wittgenstein, are rooted also in his own childhood and adolescence. A significant fact for Cavell was that his father, “a Polish Jew whose Polish was gone, whose Yiddish was frozen, and whose English was broken” (Cavell 2010, 127), spoke no language naturally. Highly sensitive to his accented English, and driven by economic ne-
cessity to move his family from one part of the US to another, Cavell’s father suffered deeply from this abiding sense of immigancy. In the country where he lived and worked, he felt always like a stranger. Cavell’s father passed on this complex experience to his sensitive only son, for whom American English (particularly as it was transfigured in the writings of Emerson and Thoreau) became a philosophical site to explore the vagaries of native speech.

Revitalising these themes of translation and emergency, the chapters in this collection reposition Cavellian concerns in the lived space of the classroom. In a particularly accessible and compelling piece, Joris Vlieghe reads the third-level seminar through a Cavellian lens – as he makes the salient point that teachers and students at university, even when linguistically proficient, are continuously “stuttering” and “leaping” into language. Language, again, is never something that we are fully in possession of and it is in admitting this dispossession that we recognise ourselves as children rather than adults. In one of the many interesting pairings inspired by Standish and Saito’s book, Vlieghe pursues these themes through Cavell’s writing as well as the writings of the Italian thinker Giorgio Agamben.

As Vlieghe unites Cavell and Agamben, Ian Munday brings together Cavell and Deleuze. For his own sensitive critique of contemporary educational discourse and its “problem-solving” emphasis, Munday builds on earlier work by Saito and Standish. A more Cavellian approach to education, he astutely points out, would involve not the solving but the dissolving of problems. This dissolving would involve a kind of therapy, in the process of which both teachers and students would realise that our educational questions had been misconceived from the beginning.

Equally incisive is Megan Laverty’s chapter on “Communication as Translation”. Inspired by Cavell’s emphasis on the tonal qualities of philosophical writing, Laverty calls for attention to the Deweyan philosophical voice in all its nuance and all its subtlety. Worrying too much about whether Dewey is or is not a pragmatist, Laverty argues, in fact engenders the risk of not fully hearing his distinctive sound – and so Dewey’s philosophical writings stand to be heard as if for the first time. This perceptive and incisive point by Laverty is typical of the collection’s overall sensitivity.

Though certain chapters stray a little far from the guiding theme of translation (see, perhaps, the chapters from Laugier, Colapietro and Pihlström), all of the contributors enhance this volume with philosophical nuance as well as power. Ruitenberg’s argument (in “The Strange in the Familiar: Education’s Encounter with Untranslatables”) that “translation can be used not only to repair cultural and linguistic gaps but also to call attention to them” (143) is particularly intriguing in its relevance for our increasingly intercultural educational space. “Untranslatables confront educational scholars with the cultural situatedness of what it is possible to think and argue” (153), Ruitenberg writes; untranslatables demand in general that we advance with caution when educating across linguistic or cultural gaps.

What this collection underlines most forcefully are the experiences of lostness and unfamiliarity that lie at the very heart of every communicative process. As Standish points out in his moving chapter, “Rebuking Hopelessness”, the problems of translation “reveal, writ large, more general problems of language and meaning” (61). In speaking and writing with one another, in other words, it is paramount that we labour to be understood. Because of the fundamental uncertainty residing at the very heart of language, our selves and our communities are fully dependent on such labour ordinarily enacted.

As Saito and Standish artfully illustrate, translation as well as immigancy are native hu-
man circumstances. Where our familiar is always experienced as strange; where, in Cavellian parlance, our ordinary is always experienced as extraordinary; these same circumstances are not to be surmounted but to be embraced. Indeed, they are the very essence of our lives in language. The work of translation, then, is necessary, difficult and ongoing and the many directions for this complex task are fruitfully signalled by *Stanley Cavell and Philosophy as Translation*. For philosophers as well as educators, there is much in this new collection to unsettle and to inspire.

**References**