

Translator Ethics

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Abstract

Translator ethics starts from the people involved in the production of translations rather than from translations as texts. Generalist versions of translator ethics address the translator's moral responsibilities as a whole person, while restricted versions focus more on the translator's specific position as a translator, often as a member of a selected group or a profession. The restricted approaches variously draw on antecedents in the philosophy of dialogue, the initially feminist discourse on visibility, the interpersonal aspects of *Skopos* theory, and neo-classical negotiation theory, which includes elements of risk management and trust theory. A core interest is in the translator's 'commissive promise' to represent an anterior text. This promise acts in the interpersonal relations around the translator and can give rise to institutionalized or personalized trust in the translator, and by extension trust in the translation as a representation. The Western forms by which such trust is created are nevertheless challenged by the revisability of electronic communication, by the rise of machine translation, by the growing facilitation of collective translation acts, and by a concomitant forward-looking orientation towards an ethics of virtuous effects rather than the traditional backward-looking trust in representation.

1. Introduction: a space for people

The term "translator ethics" focuses primarily on human translators (or indeed interpreters, here and throughout) rather than other things in the scene of translation (or interpreting): languages, cultures, texts, and external causes involving those things, all of which are considered of lesser priority. The approach thus seeks an ethics not of translations as things but of the *people* who make decisions concerning translations, bearing in mind that the lone translator is rarely the only person involved. The general task of this approach is to find reasons why some of those decisions might be ethically better than others. The difficulty of the enterprise is that those reasons should derive from *interpersonal* relations in the scene of translation itself, rather than from suppositions about relations to linguistic objects. Principles such as simple faithfulness to a text, or loyalty to the one-sided development of a language or culture, or a wider commitment to the righting of wider social wrongs are therefore not addressed directly in translator ethics, although principles based on translator decisions may certainly provide orientation *a posteriori* for many of those considerations.

As such, translator ethics is also to be distinguished from approaches that start from an assumed general professional best practice, the laws of the land, or a person's responsibilities as a world citizen. It might go without saying that any translator, as a person, should subscribe to the norms of professional conduct, not break the law, and act altruistically and

ecologically. Those considerations, however, do not strictly concern the person's status *as a translator*; they should apply to any activity whatsoever.

Defenders of a restricted translator ethics seek only to discuss the translator as a professional identity. The few that overtly do so (Pym 1997, 2012; perhaps Chesterman 2001, but also the voices behind parts of most professional codes of ethics) accept the restriction as an intellectual challenge and a constraint on hard thought. Around that narrow approach, there are nevertheless issues of visibility, intervention, trust, loyalty, agency and long-term effects that necessarily inform several other kinds of translator ethics as well. Detractors of the narrow view, of whom there could be quite a few (Tymoczko 2000, 2007; Cronin 2003; Hermans 2009; Baker 2011, for starters), decry it in terms such as “neo-tribalism” (Koskinen 2000, 78), often in the name of a wider ethics that would seek direct critique of iniquities rather than the formulation of guidelines suited to just one professional identity. As a space of inquiry and debate, translator ethics is where those arguments entangle.

2. Historical background

The development of translator ethics can be seen as part of a general shift of attention from texts to translators, indeed to “translator studies” (Chesterman 2009), roughly from the mid 1990s. Prior to that shift, the linguistic analyses that compared languages and sought rules for equivalence effectively configured the translator as the idealized subject of those rules, an anonymous language operator. Reacting against that reduction, says Chesterman (2009, 15–16), translator studies adopts approaches where “texts are secondary, the translators themselves are primary; this priority leads to quite different kinds of research questions.” Some of those questions directly concerned ethical practice in the 1990s, especially in a Europe of political corruption and anti-globalization (cf. Pym ed. 2001). The shift of attention also gained much from incipient work on public-service interpreting (e.g. Mason ed. 1999), where communication participants are visible to each other and traditional text-based ethics do not adequately address the purposes of their interactions. Important precursors of the shift can also be found in *Skopos* theory, based on action rather than texts, and indeed in the wider shifts within linguistics, where pragmatics drew attention to speech acts as interpersonal action.

Once that space had been carved out, translator ethics began to draw retrospectively on several previous areas of ethical inquiry: one strand led through the philosophy of dialogue, another drew on the initially feminist discourse of visibility, and a third found inspiration in neo-classical negotiation theory.

2.1. Buber, Levinas and the philosophy of dialogue

The Austrian-born Jewish philosopher and translator Martin Buber (1923) distinguished two basic modes of interpersonal address: *Ich-Du* (I-Thou) is the “primary word” and works in conjunction with *Ich-Es* (I-It), for which it provides the foundational ethical relationship. Buber's concern was not directly with translation: his *Ich-Du* word initially referred to prayer as intimate dialogue. The distinction has nevertheless been applied to translation in the work of Arnaud Laygues (2004, 2006), who proposes that ethical translating operates the question “What do *you* mean?” seeking dialogue with the intimate second-person other, rather than the question “What does *this* mean?” which interacts with the text as object.

This idea finds inspiration in a predominantly Francophone “philosophy of dialogue,” sketched out by Laygues. Following Buber, Gabriel Marcel (1935) situated the foundational ethical relationship in the subject’s openness to the *freedom* of the other. This position was radicalized in the work of Emmanuel Levinas (1961, 1991), who distinguished between the other (*autre*) that is like the self (a neighbour or community member) and the “completely Other” (*Autrui absolument autre*) who is not, “even if they are my son or daughter” (260). (This use of “*Autrui*” is the implicit reference when writers in English capitalize “the Other.”) To recognize the other as a completely Other, rather than as an understandable object, is to resist the totalitarian desire to impose one’s own sense: the other as other should be recognized as existing beyond the purposes and construals of the self. These basic terms reappear in Antoine Berman’s (1999) critique of domestication as “ethnocentric translation” and his call for close attention to the letter of the foreign text when translating: “the ethical act consists in recognizing and receiving the Other as Other” (74). For Berman (1999, 46), an ethical translation is thus the welcoming of alterity or otherness (cf. Melby 1995, 120–22, Le Blanc 2009, 30, Tymoczko 2007, 323), couched in interpersonal rather than linguistic terms. The same philosophical tradition that Laygues uses to seek an ethical *way of translating*, based on construing intention, can thus be enlisted by Berman to legislate an ethical *kind of translation*, based for the most part on respecting the integrity of the other’s linguistic product. Both approaches concern translator ethics for as long as they are talking about what translators should do as people.

In between the classical binarisms of self and other, domestication and foreignization, there have been several attempts to envisage a middle path for the translator’s actions. The French poet and translator Henri Meschonnic (1999) in particular, defended capturing the *rhythm* of the start text, since the thing to be translated is “what a way of thinking [*une pensée*] does to language” (23). That “way of thinking” is held to reside in the rhythms on all levels of the text, which evade binary distinctions between form and meaning. As such, Meschonnic’s ethics may superficially seem to meet up with Berman’s priority to the “letter” of the start text, and thus potentially to a form of dialogue with the rhythms of the other. Meschonnic’s main field of concern, however, is the Hebrew Bible as an authoritative and perhaps incantatory text. In assuming the authority of that text, he effectively turns openness to rhythm into a particularly virulent form of admonition directed at all alternative ethical or aesthetic criteria, repeatedly formulating “police actions against the hapless victims of his exegetical wrath” (Sieburth 2000, 323)—an unexpected underground ally might actually be Newmark (1988, 204), who more overtly pronounced that the translator has “no right to improve an authoritative text.” The only ultimately laudable translator becomes the self-authorizing theorist, as rhythm replaces people.

In the theories that eschew that kind of authority, the philosophy of dialogue can retrospectively be seen as a fundamentally pessimistic view of communication. It positions the speaking subject as an other that is being painfully and always imperfectly revealed, and the receiver as seeking and failing to interpret that imperfection. The human individual thus ontologically precedes construction of the social, even when interaction with the other is recognized as an escapable condition for the development of social categories (notably the category of time, for Levinas). Despite the term “dialogue” the approach has little concern for communication as an act where people are actually doing something together in a coordinated way (see House 2003, 27); it does not envisage substantial subjectivity being constituted as a result of that interaction. The philosophy of dialogue, particularly in the later Levinas’s authoritarian pronouncements against the category of totality, was formulated from the pessimism of a Europe that had suffered totalitarian fascism—the social was feared. That

critique was understandable enough, particularly among its Jewish exponents, although its continuation beyond the second half of the twentieth century might fairly be seen as a failure to adapt to new challenges. The ethics of dialogue has not, for example, led into any overt ethical positioning with respect to problematics like the role of immigration in producing culturally hybrid societies, where the “completely other” now effectively shares the political space of the self. The strangeness in translation that was formerly configured as respect for a distant culture can now be used to mark out unacceptable cultural exclusion from social dialogue, an effective denial of inclusivity. In historical terms, it becomes a case of overkill, artificially prolonging a hermeneutic and aesthetic discourse nobly developed for other purposes in another age. The thrust of the critique has thus mostly dwindled into soft intellectual platitude, without necessary recourse to action beyond the text.

Those reservations notwithstanding, a literalist ethics of otherness has remained strong in Francophone texts, feeding into Derrida (where the ethics of difference remains, along with Derrida’s assumption of authority in correcting previous translators) and, in English, meeting up with a more overtly politicized discourse on visibility. The deeper Buberian considerations, on the other hand, have found less resonance in the literature, although one occasionally finds allusions such as Oittinen’s (1993) “I am me, I am other” in her work on children’s translation, or Diaz-Diocaretz’s (1985, 5) call for a mode of feminist translation where “the ‘you’ and ‘I’ are overtly women.” That, however, is from a different discourse.

2.2. Critiques of invisibility

The critique of invisibility has been a mainstay of feminism since the 1970s, when the apparent absence of notable women in many cultural and scientific fields was attributed to them having been made invisible by patriarchal social structures. Powerlessness and silence made invisibility “a dangerous and painful condition” (Rich 1984, 198), a wrong to be righted by making the invisible visible.

Work has indeed been done to make women translators more prominent in translation history (Delisle [1999] 2002; Agorni 2002; von Flotow 2011, for example) and to focus on women translating women’s texts (Wolf 2006, for another example). The ethical import is nevertheless more pronounced in theorists such as Godard (1989), who uses the notion of visibility to criticize the dominant translation form itself, arguing that all translators, like women, have been cast into secondary discursive roles and have thus been made invisible. This argument draws on a long Western tradition of gendered metaphors for translation, where secondariness does indeed tend to be feminine. For Godard, translating is just as creative as authoring, and translators should thus be treated as authors. This claim has been picked up by many since then (for example, Delisle 1993; Simon 1996; von Flotow 1997), although the binary distinctions operative in early feminist discourse have been criticized from the perspective of the “woman interrogated” (Maier 1985), deconstruction (Arrojo 1994) and the LGBTQ spectrum (Santaemilia 2005; Baer and Massardier-Kenny 2016). Despite the critiques, the underlying shared claim would be that translators, like women and now like all sexualities, should be made visible, as an ethical act of emancipation.

The analogy between women and translators was taken one small step further in Chamberlain (1992), where the distinction between author and translator was seen as a function of the more general social distinction between productive and reproductive work, with women being relegated to the latter. To challenge the separation embedded in the Western translation

form, or at least in its metaphors, was thus implicitly to challenge the underlying patriarchal organization of society.

That particular critique can be worked on in two ways. For some (perhaps a small tradition leading from Chamberlain 1992 through to Apter 2006 and beyond), translation itself is a subversive form that undermines binary distinctions between subject positions—it is enough to make the translator visible, to thereby reveal the hybrid nature of translation, often taken as a metaphor itself, in order to release its potential for ethical critique of all binary oppositions. Others have been variously inspired by Foucault's (1979) analysis of the "author function," where the author is seen not as the substantial human creator of a text but as an image produced by a discourse, working as an institutional constraint on unbridled fictionality. By analogy, the "translator function" is the discursive construction of the translator's position and voice, created in interaction between writer and reader, and institutionalized socially (Díaz-Diocaretz 1985; Hermans 1996; Pulido 2016; cf. Hermans 2007, 84). This translator function would control the risk of translation becoming just any old kind of representation—the analogy with the "author function" indeed suggests that translation operates as a kind of fiction. For Duarte (2012, 34), for example, part of this control is not just the normative invisibility of the translator but also the millennial binarisms with which translation has been conceptualized: "binary oppositions are the stock in trade of the discourse of the expert," in keeping with the nature of the "expert systems" in which we are obliged to trust (Giddens 1990). On this second view, the position of the translator may in itself not be at all subversive or destabilizing but would tend instead to be ideologically driven by normalization—as indeed is claimed by the law of "growing standardization" (Toury 2005, 303–06), which sees translations as having less variation than their corresponding start texts, perhaps because translators might be risk-averse (Pym 2015). In the same vein, Díaz-Diocaretz (1985, 3) laments the way in which some translations can effectively neutralize feminist constructs.

When engaging in such debates, theorists throw around countless presuppositions about who translators are and how ideally active or passive their roles should be. The ethical postulates are reasonably clear and well-intentioned, and as such need no empirical grounding in actual practice (which may be considered reprehensible and not worth looking at in detail). The arguments nevertheless largely proceed through conceptually tenuous universal homologies ("translators are like women," "translations are like fictions") for which little data is presented, and on equally facile universalist assumptions of translatorial inferiority (for example in Simeoni 1998, where all translators are assumed to adopt a habitus of subordination). The absence of historical or cross-cultural awareness is sometimes quite astonishing: before assuming invisibility, one should take a good long look.

If there are only two sides of the coin, casual flipping allows for any number of speculative revolutions.

2.3. Neo-classical cooperation and trust theory

A third panel in this background would be an approach that focuses on the sought outcome of mediated communication, indeed of any communication at all. Working from Grice (1975), it is assumed that the mutually desired outcome of a conversation is "cooperation," which neo-classical economic theory analyzes as the attainment of mutual benefits (after Smith [1776] 2000; Axelrod 1997, and much else). A non-ethical interaction would then be where one sides wins and the other loses (a "zero-sum game"); a minimally ethical interaction would be one where both sides win, advancing their interests more than they would if interacting with

someone else (i.e. more than their “opportunity costs”). Altruism can also be laudibly ethical, as when one allows the other side win at one’s own cost, but the neo-classical theory of cooperation does not require such a subject: the normalizing assumption is usually that all subjects are rational egoists, increasing their own benefits while ensuring that the other also advances. If there is self-abnegating altruism, so much the better, but this approach is more demanding than any simple praise of do-gooders (although the assumption of reciprocal egoism includes openness to the “freedom” of the other).

This basic economic analysis can be applied to value created at any level: social, symbolic, and cultural as well as financial (to borrow from Bourdieu’s analysis of capitals, which further includes exchanges between the different kinds of capitals). In all these possible modes, the theory posits that cooperation is ethically virtuous, since it provides the building blocks of social relations and can theoretically do so without hegemony (Keohane 1984).

When translation is built into this communication model, it is first as a “transaction cost” (Pym 1995), since someone has to pay for the work of the translator. This allows for the surprising claim that it is ethically laudable to produce cheap translations, since the savings thus made allow more scope for cooperation between the main communication partners, and thereby more future work for the translator. Such propositions are gleefully anathemic to approaches that would seek to maximize the translator’s investment in dialoguing with the other; they wilfully affront the elitism of any foreignizing ethics that produces difficult translations accounting for no more than the relation with the author; they do unfortunately little to favour aspirations to a professionalism based on the idea that translators are generally undervalued and underpaid. One should thus not be surprised to find quite negative reactions to cooperation theory, often with the reproach that it concerns no more than codes of practice (deontology) rather than any ethics in the nobler philosophical senses of dialogue and visibility. And it certainly does not address the morality of the translator as an independent person engaged in understanding someone else in any depth.

The casting of the translator as *Homo economicus* is nevertheless only one of the possible ways in which the theory of cooperation can be applied. As soon as one adds to the model the risk of communicative failure (or of “communicative suffering,” for Chesterman 1997, 2001), the role of the translator becomes a major factor in the calculation of that risk. The translator becomes not only another communication participant but also a participant presenting special risks and requiring exceptional trust. Ascertaining and maintaining the mediator’s trustworthiness thus becomes a major element of risk management, requiring expenditure of communicative resources and other forms of capital. That is, although simple transaction-cost analysis suggests that cheap translators can be a laudable option for many communicative purposes (as indeed we are now seeing with the widespread use of machine translation and postediting), risk analysis also shows that there are situations in which translators should be the object of very significant attention and investment. As a rule of thumb, the greater the risks involved in the communication act, the higher the permissible transaction costs and the more resources should be invested in establishing the trustworthiness of the translator. Translator ethics thus becomes a question of trust.

This approach has thus seen a conceptual development from cooperation to risk to trust, with numerous hypotheses and studies along the way, and with just as many misunderstandings from outside these frames of reference. The key role of trust has nevertheless gained some more general acceptance on the basis of two normalizing assumptions. First, it is assumed that the other participants do not know the languages that the translator knows and are thus

condemned situations of asymmetric information: buying a translation is something like buying a used car, based on the social signalling of trustworthiness (Chan 2009). Second, given the translator's knowledge of both sides, there is the basic risk that they are acting in the interests of the other side (activating a personalist version of the adage *traduttore, traditore*—the translator is a potential traitor). These two concerns can certainly exist without any developed theory of cooperation (a client might, for example, simply trust that the translator is a good person who will defend nothing but that client's one-sided interests), although one then has to go back to the reasons why communication is being entered into in the first place. Within the cooperative frame, successful communication produces benefits for all (including the translator), and so the translator is primarily trusted to seek those benefits. Without the cooperative frame, the translator can merely be trusted to act as a mercenary.

Risk management and trust open up broad avenues for inquiry into ethics. The probabilistic and situationally adjustable concepts of risk management (credibility risk, uncertainty risk, communicative risk, for starters) have the potential to replace fidelity and equivalence as the yardsticks for assessing translators' actions, and to do so on all levels from process analysis through to social relations (Pym 2015). And trust analysis, which develops the concept of credibility risk, has been proposed as a general framework for translation history (Rizzi et al. 2019). These approaches might hope to avoid some of the universalisms of other kinds of translator ethics. At the same time, though, risk management comes with its own general presuppositions. When Chesterman (1997) claims that translators, "in order to survive as translators, must be trusted by all parties involved" (182), he adds a significant rider: "Without this trust, the profession would collapse, and so would its practice" (182). The ethics of cooperation and trust do indeed assume that the aim is to maintain and develop a profession (as "thin" trust), providing a conceptual bases for improved codes of deontology. Indeed, it assumes that this is itself one of the historical missions to which ethical research should contribute. That, however, is the "neo-tribalism" that has been criticized from the perspective of wider brands of ethics.

3. Core issues

The prolonged focus on the figure of the translator has been accompanied by several debates about quite fundamental ethical principles.

3.1. Trust as professional promise?

A move to place the translator at the centre of ethics was made by Christiane Nord (1991) from within *Skopos* theory: alongside being faithful to the text, Nord's translator must be *loyal* not just to the author, but also to the client and the end user of the translation. In Chesterman's terms (1997, 182), one might say the translator must *merit* the trust invested "by all parties involved." Nord has little to say about how to proceed when different loyalties clash, although she does recommend signalling discrepancies in paratexts, arguing points with clients, and in some cases refusing to translate (1997, 226; 2001, 200). Those are things translators *can* do as modes of enhanced visibility; the concept of loyalty does not say *when* or *why* translators might act in these ways, in whose interests, or with what kind of agency. Yet the call to multidirectional loyalty is of interest in itself, since it creates something that might look like neutrality but can be full of intervention.

Nord's position might only superficially be opposed to that of Newmark (1994), whose fidelity to authoritative texts also questioned one-sided allegiance: "the days of "my employer right or wrong" should be as dead as those of "my country or my cause right or wrong"" (70). One might similarly point to any of the calls for cross-cultural dialogue, or to the anti-nationalism of Berman and Venuti, or indeed to any of the critics of Eurocentrism who see the fundamental purposes of translation itself as being to question one-sided loyalty.

Those positions can be opposed to ethics where the translator's prime duty is to a particular kind of truth. When the Soviet translation scholar Fedorov (1953, 98) lists "truthfulness" as his first principle of translation quality, the reference is to truth as seen in Marxist-Leninist principles; when the East German Kade defends "partiality in interpreting," he notes that assessment of "what is important and unimportant" is from the "point of view of the working class, on the basis of the Marxist-Leninist worldview" (1963, 15, cited in Pöchhacker 2006, 200). More recently, a Chinese approach to ethics, based on a view where the well-being of the community is the only guarantee of individual rights, can give ethical priority to defending the client and maintaining national interests rather than any individualized multilateralism (Feng 2014). This becomes a reasoned critique of the individualism that underlies most Western approaches to ethics, seen as being based on the notion of initial wrong-doing (from the Judeo-Christian myth of original sin) rather than collective well-being.

These differences point to fundamental divergences in the very nature of the translator's social identity. Nord's plea for multilateral loyalty assumes a space from which that loyalty can be distributed as a series of visible actions. Translators can certainly be loyal to themselves and they can rightly expect that their loyalty to others will be reciprocated (these points are clear in Prunč 1997, 2000), but there is no ethical need envisaged here for them to take on purely individual interventions beyond the space of those multilateral relations: translators can do any good deeds they like, as altruistically as they like, but they need not be doing so *as loyal translators*. That space is thus neither one side nor the other; it can have its own virtues and values (loyalty, yes, but also virtues such as those proposed by Chesterman 2001, open to modification in each translation regime). The great misunderstanding of that space is that it would somehow see the translator as a neutral figure, an "honest broker," someone whose intercultural position is marked by "actively created neutrality" (Koskinen 2000, 71; cf. Lambert 2018). That seems not to be necessary for Nord's loyalty, which calls for visible intervention but makes no particular claim to neutrality. Nor is it in any way implied by theories of cooperation, where the sides are assumed to be initially *unequal* and the rewards are also normally unequal: non-cooperation is bordered by unacceptable loss, not by neutrality. Nor indeed is neutrality a necessary feature of intercultural professions, which mark out the borders between cultures but rarely do so as uninvolved bystanders (cf. the historical studies in Pym 2000, where the translator's self-interest is always part of the deal).

What is at stake here is not neutrality but a particular kind of trust invested in the translator in certain situations. Tymoczko (1999, 110) calls translation a "commissive act," glossed by Chesterman (2001, 149) as a kind of promise: "I hereby promise that this text represents the original in some relevant way." That implicit promise is the basis for the variable trust invested in the translator. The promise is not made in all translation regimes: it remains prevalent in much of Western translation since the Renaissance but is only fleetingly operative in pre-Modern translation practice in most parts of the world. Other kinds of commissive acts may come into play, such as an undertaking to entertain, to instruct or to

support a particular community. Those different kinds of trust are building blocks in the different institutionalizations of translation.

The viability of mutual trust relationships has been questioned. For Abdallah (2011, 140), trust can only properly operate when “the perspectives and interests of each stakeholder are addressed, knowledge is shared, and information is clear.” This paints trust into an unreasonably idealized corner: if everything is already known to everyone, then there will be no reason for trust. On the contrary, it is precisely because information is scarce, asymmetrically distributed, and typically hard to understand when foreign languages are involved, that the promise is necessary and trust needs to be invested. That is why Giddens (1990, 33) notes that trust is always “in a certain sense blind trust”; it involves a pact with “something unknown” (Froeliger 2012, 52). That is why “the institution of promising” survives whether or not “individual promises are broken or kept” (Duarte 2012, 25).

The trust in representation (“in some relevant way”) is the cornerstone of a particular Western institutionalization of translation and perhaps provides a reason for multilateral loyalty. Remove it, for example by insisting that translators are only trusted just like any other author, and the whole artifice can tumble down.

3.2. An ethics of disruption?

Perhaps the most radical critique of the “loyal” or “trustworthy” translator comes from a questioning of how translation works within globalization. This in part stems from theorizations of translation as an institution (from Hermans 1997) or as an “expert system” (Duarte 2012) where power relations are such that translators work to favour hegemonic classes or world cultural centres. Evidence is gleaned from statistics on translation flows between languages (Heilbron 2000) and from claims that there are many translations *from* English but very few translations *into* the central lingua franca (Pym and Chrupała 2005). Contemporary translation practices might thus become part and parcel of a system where only the voices of the powerful are heard. The consequences of this imbalance for researchers are forcefully drawn out by Cronin (2002) in the field of interpreting, but could be applied across the board:

The role of interpreters throughout history has been crucially determined by the prevailing hierarchical constitution of power and the position of interpreters in it. In this respect, if you or your people are seriously disadvantaged by the hierarchy, the most ethical position can be to be utterly ‘unfaithful’ in interpreting in the name of another fidelity, a fidelity of resistance. (58–59)

This would be a translator ethics to the extent that it calls for translators to act. If the system does not work to your advantage, then break (with) the system: “non-participation” (*nicht mitmachen*) had been espoused by Adorno ([1942] 2017) when warning of the cultural machinations of capitalism, and the call is faintly echoed in Venuti’s term for non-domesticating, non-fluent renditions: “resistant” translation (Venuti 1995), drawing in part on the concept of “abusive fidelity” (Lewis 1985, 42): “fidelity to much more than semantic substance, fidelity also to the modalities of expression and to rhetorical strategies.”

Cronin, though, seems to be talking about rather more than translation strategies. His resistance would involve disruption of the entire hegemonic system, and his fidelity is to... to what exactly? Lewis and Venuti, along with Berman, can claim to be working within what is required by most translation norms: they remain faithful to the text, to the letter of the text,

although Lewis thereafter adds an appeal to “originality.” Their resistance is rather like strikes based on zeal or working to minimal requirements—no one can complain that their translators are not being “faithful.” It is something quite different to recognize situations where the translator can be “utterly *unfaithful*.” That could mean surreptitiously deceiving communication partners and thereby undoing the entire system of trust. A radically new image of the translator emerges. Yet Cronin, like many of those who call for action across all fields of communication, has so far had little to say about the exact values and principles to which that new translator should be faithful. The trick is that, like authoritarian figures from struggling countries, the cause gains adepts because of what it is nobly *against*, while no one is really sure about the new world it is working *for*. At no point is there any careful analysis of precisely which part of the system needs to be changed, and in which way. Is there any guarantee that the translator’s promise might really be the root of evil? At least classical Marxism offered analysis. Now we are simply asked to trust that our local translation theorist knows the way forward.

4. Emerging issues

Relatively current issues in translator ethics tend to continue the above debates, albeit within slightly new frames. The question of whether the translator acts as an individual or a professional becomes slightly more acute as translation emerges as an institution with its own priorities, entering into conflict with other social systems. And the great underlying change is the development of free online machine translation, which threatens to separate the translator from translation.

4.1. The translator or the whole person?

Perhaps the most contentious aspect of translator ethics is its wilful acceptance of limitations, in the sense that it only purports to address what the translator does in the scene of translation. The approach thereby does not enter into debates about serving noble or ignoble causes on a wider plane. That position can be found in Leonardo Bruni: “I did not say he was a bad man, only a bad translator. I might easily say the same of Plato if he wanted to be the navigator of a ship but had no knowledge of navigation” ([1424-1426] 2014, 57–58). For a more recent example, one might professionally applaud the Nazi interpreter Eugen Dollmann for enabling cooperation between Hitler and Mussolini, while at the same time vigorously condemning the wider causes for which he worked and in which he fundamentally believed (Dollmann 2017; cf. Pöchhacker 2006 for further case histories). Literary critics have been doing this forever, rescuing great poetry from the political opinions of an Ezra Pound or T. S. Eliot. For most translator ethics, it is similarly tempting to draw a line between the translator’s professional identity and their personal identity as a family member, law-abiding (or law-breaking) citizen or maker of political choices.

Making that separation is not always a simple matter, but it can help address otherwise intractable problems. A case in point is that of Marina Gross, the US State Department interpreter who worked at a private meeting between US President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin on July 16, 2018. Gross was called to tell a US congressional committee what the two leaders said. Should she give testimony? As a US citizen, she should probably not keep vital information from her government; as a government employee she would have further obligations to disclose information; but as a professional interpreter she is at the same time bound by the principle of client

confidentiality, which appears in almost all the codes of ethics (see, for example, AIIC 2018). A profession-based ethics enables us to draw parentheses around what should be done as a citizen, government employer, or good person, and then seek an answer on the basis of what Gross's role as a professional translator should be. If that particular aim is to favour long-term cooperation between cultures, then one can argue that confidential exchanges between leaders help build interpersonal trust, hence greater possibilities for long-term cooperation. The professional principle of confidentiality can thus be defended.

That way of addressing ethical problems is quite different from recognizing a professional identity and then blindly applying the current codes of ethics that seem to apply—such is the level of debate surrounding the case of Gross. Ethical thought should be able to seek answers and reasons that go beyond allegiance to established norms and principles. Indeed, it should provide a conceptual framework able to support or question the current codes of ethics.

This same logic can be enlisted against most calls for the translator to act as an individual rather than a professional. Chesterman (2001, 147) thus sees an ethics of commitment to social causes, despite its moral value, as standing outside the professional realm: “[p]rofessional ethics [...] govern a translator’s activities qua translator, not qua political activist or life-saver.” One can of course counter that translators are free to act in extra-professional capacities, and that such activities serve to raise awareness about translation and ultimately assist the profession’s public image (cf. Cronin 2010; McDonough Dolmaya 2011; Yoo and Jeong 2017). At that point, however, the issue overlaps with how awareness of translation travels across social networks, which these days concerns how translators interact with technologies.

4.2. What happens when everyone can translate?

The availability of free online machine translation and generative AI means that the vast majority of the translating being done in the world is not done by paid translators. When every user of a computer can potentially produce some kind of translation, what role is left to professional translators? And what does this mean for their ethics?

Gone are the days when translators could tell themselves that automation would never rival the quality of fully human translation. Gone, too, is the time when translators could happily benefit from using translation memories and other electronic aids, enhancing productivity without compromising employment. There were ethical problems with the use of translation memories, notably in the ownership of databases and the separation of translations from communicative events (Pym 2004; Stupiello 2014). But to pretend that automation now merely extends those problems is now to live in serious denial. Some analysis is necessary.

Most uses of machine translation and generative AI for translation concern tasks that previously either would not have been undertaken or would not have gone to a paid translator. This means the technology has laudably increased the amount of translating that is happening, including the amount of volunteer translating that is done for good causes that have little to do with translator ethics as such. So far there is scant evidence that technology has actually reduced the number of employed professionals (the current indicators still show overall growth, although most of the expansion is in the larger companies). The challenge lies in the nature of the employment. As the correction of machine translation (“postediting”) becomes akin to copyediting, the productive applications of the trained translator’s skills move toward the more high-risk value-added tasks: the translator is also becoming an

adapter, a transcreator, an editor, a journalist, a marketing expert, a public-relations professional, a curator of data bases, and so on, with many new names for such mixes. And as that happens, the technology is moving the translator beyond the commissive promise to “represent the original.”

We now begin to appreciate why that particular kind of promise depended on the long age of print and the concomitant promises of modernity. Different kinds of promises might be called for, associated with new names for new occupations, and with them different kinds of ethical causes. Restrictive codes of ethics that apply only to professional translators in the Western tradition might not survive. Yet appeals to cooperation, which is a principle applicable to all cross-cultural communication (indeed all communication), might yet ride out the storm.

5. Conclusion: things still missing

The basic issues of translator ethics began life as arguments and models: they were about the nature of translation, the fallacies of simple thought or the profundities of basic paradoxes. Over time, with the shifts toward cooperation, risk management and trust, those issues have become fields for empirical research, as we discover the logics by which translation regimes have developed different ethical principles, in history and across cultures. That move to empirical historical inquiry is at once a recognition of relativism and a potential debilitation of activism: once you know that your cause is not for all time and all places, you tend to fight for it with a little less enthusiasm.

There has also been a change in the direction of our attentions. A translator ethics based on dialogue was forever looking backwards at the start text or author. Ideas like visibility, cooperation, risk and trust then nudged concerns towards the future, to the translation situation, the translator, the client and the purpose of the translation. That new view has opened up a range of new questions, ultimately concerning the extent and desirability of a separate translation profession, with its own ethics and discursive personas. The shift has not, however, engaged significantly with the actual reception of translations, with the effects that different translator interventions really have on the lives of people and the configurations of cultures. Once again, numerous ethical principles have made sweeping assumptions about the consequences of translations (including the attainment of cooperation), while identification of actual effects requires careful empirical study.

Similarly, translator ethics has tacitly assumed there is just one translator involved. Scant attention has been paid to collaborative translation as shared agency, potentially with ethical principles shared across a range of different professions. That is another direction in which research and thought must address the nature of cross-cultural communication as a whole, over and above the specificities of the translator.

Finally, given the moves towards research and a wider range of professions, it seems strange not to see greater manifestation of the researcher’s positionality. The translation scholar works on cross-cultural communication just as much as any translator. There is no reason why the ethics of what we study should not also be the ethics of how we study.

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