

Up to code?

Where next for professional translation ethics?



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Questions of ethics permeate so much of our daily lives. It's not just lofty debates of good versus evil or controversial topics such as euthanasia, but a much more complex field. From considering whether we should continue to buy food, clothes or devices from brands we know exploit their workers, to weighing up the moral component of, say, tuition fees, ethics inevitably creeps into all of our personal lives. But what about the professional side? How do language professionals fit into the equation and what does ethics mean to translators?

For decades now, agencies, associations, scholars and translators have all weighed in on the matter, drawing up service agreements, non-disclosure agreements and the like, drafting codes of conduct for their members, and explicitly tackling the area in academic studies, blogs and social media posts. Yet in today's globalised world, with climate, health and economic crises presenting a more pressing danger than ever before, our thinking on translation ethics is evolving and expanding beyond more traditional concepts.

A potted history: from fidelity to agency

Within academic and professional explorations of translation ethics, the issue of fidelity has long been central. This notion has often been reduced to questions of source versus target orientation and revolves around the encounter with Otherness – other

languages, and other cultures – that is central to translation. Christiane Nord expands these notions of textual fidelity to home in on the idea of loyalty,¹ another recurrent concern in the pursuit of translation or, maybe more appropriately, translator ethics. Who or what should we, as translators, be loyal to, for instance?

While scholars such as Antoine Berman argue that our primary loyalty (and thus our “properly ethical aim” is to represent the foreignness within texts in translation;² Nord attempts to commit “the translator bilaterally to both the source and the target side”. She asks that we consider balancing the needs of the source text author, the commissioner of the work (our client) and the target audience; if this is impossible, we should negotiate or even refuse to translate. Anthony Pym, meanwhile, advocates that mutually beneficial cooperation should be our goal when translating and has explored trust as a central concept in our ethical decision-making.³

More recently, thought has shifted to questions of political engagement, activism and social responsibility. Chesterman sums up this range of issues rather neatly by suggesting a division between macro-ethical and micro-ethical matters.⁴ Macro-ethical issues encompass broad social questions “such as the role and rights of translators in society, conditions of work, financial rewards and the client's profit motive, the general aims of translation as intercultural action, power relations between translators and clients, the relation between translation and state politics”. Micro-ethical matters pertain to the “relation between the translator and the words on the page”.

These two levels feed one another, of course, and at the root of it all, the way we engage with the Otherness within a text is crucial. But we cannot lose sight of our own inevitable, personal, human input. As such, it is this broader picture that we focus on here, bringing the agent involved in this process more clearly to the forefront.

Current and emerging considerations

Through this lens of translators as the key agent, there are several areas that seem to call for urgent ethical attention. In a recent European Language Industry Survey, 72% of freelance translators reported that rates were a stress factor in their working practice, while 59% of those who participated in the Inbox Translation Freelance Translator Survey cited “low rates of pay” as the main obstacle to being a freelance translator.

However, the topic of rates has, in many instances, been avoided in literature on ethics, perhaps due to the (mis)conception that each translator is in charge of their own destiny – thus charging the rates they believe to be ethically fair – or even that rates are not an ethical issue at all. Clearly, there is much progress to be made and this complex area cannot be dealt with in isolation. Rather, it is inextricably linked to issues of status, professionalisation and understandings of translation more widely.

Elsewhere, the area through which we can most clearly view the need for renewed consideration of ethical issues is the domain of technology. While the use of translation technology is nothing new, accounting for the ethical ramifications of increased technological engagement has been a slow



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process within many professions, and the translation world is no exception. As well as perennial (yet unfounded) fears of replacement, technology usage forces us to (re)consider questions of confidentiality, data privacy, fair practice, quality, copyright and ownership of resources, as well as feeding into the other issues alluded to here.

For instance, technological developments continue to expand our collective carbon footprint and apply downward pressure to rates – whether in the form of discounts for translation memory matches, machine translation usage and post-editing, or its impact on wider understandings of translation. As powerful advances such as neural machine translation continue to develop, we risk falling even further behind if we don't start tackling these areas in earnest.

Moving forwards

Ultimately, as translators we are often embedded within institutional and political contexts that force us to balance a diverse range of (sometimes competing) duties, responsibilities, interests and aims. This is something alluded to by the likes of Christiane Nord, and yet our considerations extend far beyond the texts, authors, clients and readers we are directly linked with. We as translators need to consider our place in the world, both in terms of our impact outwardly – not just our individual footprint,

but also a collective social responsibility that accompanies any forward-thinking profession – and our position inwardly, so to speak.

Importantly, many translators stake out their own position in the world, and some argue that in order to empower professionals and shape understandings, we should seek to be seen as an active intermediary rather than an invisible, neutral conduit.

While reiterating the urgency of considering the environmental impact of translation practices, Michael Cronin helps pull these threads together by noting that “translators cannot remain neutral in the debates that concern us all.”⁵ Within this, we must allow space for our personal need to survive, a kind of economic and social self-interest: the need to pay the rent, to increase our productivity, to decide where we stand on global issues and where the balance lies in terms of personal gain and sacrifice, which can clash with wider ideological beliefs.

We must also accept that there are limits to a translator's agency. Anthony Pym put it best when he said, “asking a translator to save the world is sometimes like asking an infant to read.”⁶ However, it is crucial to remember that we are all in this together, and that counts for something. When it comes to rates or payment practices, gendered language, representation and demographics, recognition, roles, copyright and legal status, and technological terms and

conditions, we stand for or against certain practices together, and that can act as a valuable tool in ensuring that we survive and thrive in the long term.

Notes

- 1 Nord, C (2001) ‘Loyalty Revisited’. In *The Translator* 7:2, 185-202
- 2 Berman, A (2004) ‘Translation and the Trials of the Foreign’. In Venuti, L (ed) *The Translation Studies Reader*, London/New York: Routledge, 284-97
- 3 Pym, A (2021) ‘Cooperation, Risk, Trust: A restatement of translator ethics’. In *Journal of Studies in Translation and Interpreting*, 1:2, 5-24
- 4 Chesterman, A (2016) *168 Memes of Translation*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins
- 5 Cronin, M (2021) ‘World in our Hands?’ In *The Linguist*, 60,2
- 6 Pym, A (2012) *On Translator Ethics*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins

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