

# ETHICS IN TRANSLATION IS A PROFESSIONAL CONCERN

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**Abstract:** *This paper focuses on the feature of ethics in translation. The process of rendering from one language into another requires attention to cultural values, to economic and political inequalities, to individual choices and to otherness in its linguistic and cultural forms. It foregrounds some explicitly ethical questions. The question is: how much of the otherness of the foreign should the translator highlight? How much of the foreign should the translator mute or erase in order to make texts easier for the target audience to assimilate? The problems posed demand ethical solutions. It also suggests that the translator's task is inevitably an ethical one. In the present paper we shall try to highlight the moral issues in translation business and the ethics of translation.*

**Keywords:** *translation, ethics, morality, quality standards, impartiality, confidentiality, personal ethical standards.*

**Motto:** **“Translators’ ethical and political judgments become as central to their task as cultural or linguistic competence. Translators cannot escape the burden of their moral proximity to others.”**<sup>2</sup>

## 1. Introduction

Translation is a science and a profession, and as any other professions it has its own ethical problems. While dealing with the ethics in this field we should speak about the ethics of a translator and the ethics of the translation. Translation illuminates both the cultural otherness at stake in contemporary studies of nationhood and the epistemological otherness at work in language itself. It requires attention to cultural values, to economic and political inequalities, to individual choices and, perhaps most obviously, to otherness in its linguistic and cultural forms. In the process, it foregrounds some explicitly ethical questions.

Translators have long agreed that the effort to render one language system into another requires a keen awareness of broad cultural as well as specific linguistic values. It also requires existential choices that are bound

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<sup>2</sup> Inghilleri, Moira. *Translation/Interpreting and Social Activism*, Granada: ECOS, 2010, pp. 152-155.

to have wide-ranging repercussions for the text and its audience. How much of the otherness of the foreign should the translator highlight? How much of the foreign should he mute or erase in order to make texts easier for the target audience to assimilate? The problems posed demand ethical solutions. It also suggests that the translator's task is inevitably an ethical one. In attempts to translate, translators become most aware of linguistic and cultural differences, of the historical haunting and of experiential responsibilities that make languages what they are and that directly affect their attitudes toward the world.

## **2. Ethics as a science**

Ethics is the philosophical science that studies morality as a form of social consciousness as a major aspect of human activity and a specific socio-historical phenomenon. Ethics illuminates the role of morality in the context of other types of social relations; it analyzes the nature and internal structure of morality, studies its origin and historical development, and provides theoretical justification for one or another moral system. It is concerned with the nature of ultimate value and the standards by which human actions can be judged right or wrong. The term is also applied to any system or theory of moral values or principles. Ethics is traditionally subdivided into normative ethics, meta-ethics, and applied ethics.

*Normative ethics* seeks to establish norms or standards of conduct; a crucial question in this field is whether actions are to be judged right or wrong based on their consequences or based on their conformity to some moral rule, such as "Do not tell a lie."

*Meta-ethics* is concerned with the nature of ethical judgments and theories. Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century much work in meta-ethics has focused on the logical and semantic aspects of moral language. Some major meta-ethical theories are naturalism, intuitionism, emotive issues, and prescriptivism.

*Applied ethics* consists of the application of normative ethical theories to practical moral problems. Among the major fields of applied ethics are bioethics, business ethics, legal ethics, and medical ethics.

Ethics was made into a separate discipline by Aristotle; he introduced the term by using it in the titles of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Eudemian Ethics* and *Magna Moralia*. He placed ethics between the doctrine of the soul, or psychology, and the doctrine of the state, or politics; ethics, based on the former, serves the latter, in as much as its goal is to mold virtuous citizens of the state. The central issue in Aristotle's ethics was the doctrine of virtues, which he viewed as moral faculties of the individual, but his system incorporated many of the eternal questions of ethics – for example,

the nature and source of morality, freedom of the will, the foundations of the moral act, justice, and the meaning of life and of the highest good.

The principal problem in ethics has always been the question of the nature and origin of morality; in the history of ethical doctrines, however, this was usually posed as a question of the basic notions on which moral awareness of duty is founded – a question of the criteria of moral judgments.

### **3. Ethics in translation**

The work of a translator is a very hard one. Translators are like actors, they develop remarkable recall skills that will enable them to remember a word in a foreign language that they have heard only once. They read a lot, they love travelling, learn foreign languages and cultures and pay attention to how people use language all around them. Translation is often called a “profession of second choice”<sup>3</sup>:

*“Many translators were first professionals in other fields, sometimes several other fields in succession, and only turned to translation when they lost or quit those jobs or moved to a country where they were unable to practice them.”<sup>4</sup>*

Just as professionals translators face a range of ethical dilemmas in the practice of their profession. Certain countries have established codes of conduct that set out guidelines for issues such as quality standards, impartiality, and confidentiality; however, the truly difficult decisions arise when linguists are asked to translate a text that clashes with their personal ethical standards. The professional ethics of translation have traditionally been defined very narrowly: it is unethical for the translator to distort the meaning of the source text. As we have seen, this conception of translator ethics is far too narrow even from the user’s point of view: there are many cases when the translator is explicitly asked to “distort” the meaning of the source text in specific ways, as when adapting a text for television, a children’s book, or an advertising campaign. Professional ethics is an integral part of any translator. He is not an ordinary clerk, his profession is connected with the translation of information and he must do it with full responsibility.

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<sup>3</sup> Robinson, D. *Becoming a Translator. An Introduction to the Theory and Practice of Translation*. London: Routledge, 2012, p. 25.

<sup>4</sup> Robinson, D. *Becoming a Translator. An Introduction to the Theory and Practice of Translation*. London: Routledge, 2012, p. 25.

From the translator's internal point of view, the ethics of translation is more complicated still. What is a translator to do, for example, when asked to translate a text s/he finds offensive? Or, to put that differently, how does the translator proceed when professional ethics (loyalty to the person paying for the translation) clash with personal ethics (one's own political and moral beliefs)? What does the feminist translator do when asked to translate a blatantly sexist text? What does the liberal translator do when asked to translate a neo-Nazi text? What does the environmentalist translator do when asked to translate an advertising campaign for an environmentally irresponsible chemical company?

As long as thinking about translation has been entirely dominated by an *external, non-translator point of view*, these have been non-questions – questions that have not been asked. The translator translates whatever texts s/he is asked to translate, and does so in a way that satisfies the translation user's need. The translator has no personal point of view that has any relevance at all to the act of translation.

From an *internal point of view*, however, these questions must be asked. Translators are human beings, with opinions, attitudes, beliefs, and feelings. Translators who are regularly required to translate texts that they find abhorrent may be able to suppress their revulsion for a few weeks, or months, possibly even years; but they will not be able to continue suppressing those negative feelings forever. Translators, like all professionals, want to take pride in what they do; if a serious clash between their personal ethics and an externally defined professional ethics makes it difficult or impossible to feel that pride, they will eventually be forced to make dramatic decisions about where and under what conditions they want to work. When the translator's private ethics clash substantially with the interests of the commissioner, to what extent can the translator afford to live by those ethics and still go on earning a living? And on the other hand, to what extent can the translator afford to compromise with those ethics and still go on taking professional pride in his or her work? There is a very good example in the following text that makes clear the professional ethics of translator:

*“An American translator working in-house at a large translation agency was regularly assigned to translate a single client's advertisements that she felt strongly were demeaning toward women. She worked hard to suppress her resistance to translating these texts as long as she was able, but then could stand it no longer, and went to talk to her boss about being relieved from that assignment. He was sympathetic to her request, in principle, but said that he couldn't spare*

*anyone else in that language pair, and asked her to keep doing those jobs for another six months; then they would reassess the situation.*

*After another month, the translator found that she simply could not do it any longer. She went on the job market and found another job with a smaller agency, making less money, but doing work that she could believe in, and is much happier now.”<sup>5</sup>*

Clients rely on the translator to provide a translation that does full justice to the source text. This means that the translation should cover every aspect and connotation in the source, and should not add any material or connotations extraneous to the source, nor hints of the translator’s personal opinion with respect to the subject-matter. Clients ask for a sworn translation. Most professionals agree that the general principles underlying sworn translations also apply to translation in general. It is true that translations should be reliable and undistorted reflections of the source text in a different language, clients will also expect an attractive text that is pleasant to read and effective in achieving its purpose. It is impossible to simply convert the content of the source text into the target language: the requirements of the register, stylistic authenticity and readability inevitably entail some degree of modification of the original.

Having said that, here is general consensus that clients can rightfully expect a translator to possess professional skills, which entails that the translator should not accept a translation job, if s/he feels incapable of providing a high-quality text, for instance because the subject matter is not within her/his field of expertise.

#### **4. Unethical behavior in translation business**

When most people think of ethics and professionals, they tend to focus on people like accountants, doctors, lawyers, or other high profile jobs. However, everyone who deals with other people in their business has the duty and responsibility to be ethical. Translators are no exception. It is easy for people to point out unethical behavior in certain professions, but what about translators. It might not be as apparent. However, unethical activities do occur and it’s important to know what some of these are and ways to keep them from being a temptation to you.

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<sup>5</sup> Robinson, D. *Becoming a Translator. An Introduction to the Theory and Practice of Translation*. London: Routledge, 2012, p. 30

Unethical behavior in the translation profession can take many forms. For example, translators are usually on deadlines with clients and it's important to be truthful to your clients in terms of what you can accomplish in a given timeframe. If you come to terms with a client and agree to finish a job by a certain deadline, it is unethical to decide not to do that job or not finish it on time without informing the client. They usually have deadlines as well, and not respecting those is not only bad for business, but is also unethical.

Another major way that translators can be unethical is by not keeping their clients' information confidential. Translators are privy to all sorts of information, and some of this information is private and confidential to the client that requested the translation. It is definitely unethical for a translator to disclose this information to anybody. Another way that translators can be unethical is by purposely overcharging a client when a price has already been quoted. Many translators' clients are first-time clients and might not know or understand how translators calculate their fees. Translators must not give into the temptation to overcharge a client when they know that the client is a little in the dark. Taking advantage of this ignorance is unethical. Earning more in this way a translator may ruin her/his career. Ethical issues and situations can appear in any profession, and the translation profession is no exception. Translators should be aware of the ethical issues that can come up so that they know to avoid them as well. Being ethical is a responsibility that every translator has. To sum up, it is clear that translators in addition to grappling with the technical content of source texts may be up to some morally challenging tasks as well. While guidelines and codes of conduct exist to help translators formulate their stance in general ethical issues, in many cases the approach to practical moral dilemmas in translation will be a matter of personal consideration and assessment, aided by the translator's knowledge of the client.

## **5. Professionalism, codes of ethics and morality**

The translator does finally translate picking the rendition that feels right. The translator's feeling of rightness draws on the full range of her/his professional knowledge and skill; but it is in the end nevertheless a feeling, an intuitive sense. Her/his translation feels right, it is made up of thousands of decisions made with full conscious awareness and logical reasoning. The difference between a good translator and a mediocre one is not, that the former translates carefully, consciously, analytically, and the latter relies too heavily upon intuition and raw feels. Both the good translator and the mediocre translator rely heavily on analysis and

intuition, on conscious and subliminal processing. The difference is that the good translator has trained her/his intuition more thoroughly than the mediocre one, and in relying on those intuitions is actually relying on years of internalized experience and intelligent reflection.

Good translators are lifelong learners, always looking for more cultural knowledge, more words and phrases, more experience of different text types, more transfer patterns, more solutions to complex problems. Translation is intelligent activity requiring constant growth, learning, self-expansion. It should be clear that there are rules that all professional translators are expected to know and follow, and therefore that they need to be codified and made available to translators, in books or university courses. Translators should consult translation rulebooks and “authorities” in their country, or publications of their translator organizations or unions detailing the ethical principles governing the profession, or theoretical books listing specific translation problems between two specific languages and how to handle them. Most pick up a rather general sense of the laws and ethical principles and preferred methods of translation from other people, in practice, and when faced with a grey area must frequently ask what to do. This is the “alarm bell” or reticular activation phenomenon: the translator stops and realizes that there is something that s/he needs to know to proceed, but doesn’t. There are many “authorities” that the translator may need to consult:

1. Legislation governing translation.
2. Ethical principles published by translator organizations/unions.
3. Theoretical statements of the general ethical/professional principles governing translation.
4. Theoretical studies, often corpus-based, of specific translation problems in specific language combinations, comparative grammars.
5. Single-language grammars.
6. Dictionaries, glossaries, terminological databases.
7. Previous translations and other materials obtained from the client, agency, database, and library.
8. Expert advice and information from people who have worked in the field or have some other reliable knowledge about it.

Professional translators are “reflective and ethically responsible citizens”<sup>6</sup>. For many practitioners, professional codes of translation and interpreting are and must remain the reference point for ethical behavior in the field.

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<sup>6</sup> Baker, Mona. *In Other Words. A Course book on Translation*. London: Routledge, 2011, p.284.

Almost all codes drawn up by associations that represent translators and interpreters consider accuracy, impartiality and confidentiality as imperative for professional behavior.

## 6. Conclusion

We shall conclude our article with a few words about ethics of translators and interpreters said by Camayd-Freixas, who was offered the Inttranews Linguist of the Year Award in 2008:

*“We live in changing times where the canons of ethics are being redefined in many professions. For translators and interpreters, the prime imperative is accuracy, followed by impartiality and confidentiality. In cases of conflict, accuracy governs. And today there are cases in which accuracy must be regarded as something more than mere literal correctness. If we are to be more than translation machines, more than automatons, if we strive to have a conscience and a heart, we must go beyond the words, to the deeper structures of meaning. For long, linguists have taken refuge in the comfort of formal correctness, but our world has closed that loophole. That ethical shelter is no more. Our oath of accuracy means a commitment to truth.”<sup>7</sup>*

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<sup>7</sup> Camayd-Freixas (2008a) in Baker, Mona. *In Other Words. A Course book on Translation*. London: Routledge, 2011, p.285.