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Exploring Ethical Issues in Translation Based on Translation Ethics and In Other Words

Yongxia Ruan
University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai 310110, China

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Abstract

In the current process of professionalization in translation, ethical issues faced by translators themselves are gradually emerging. The role of the translator is closely related to the ethical issues encountered during the translation process. Therefore, exploring the ethical issues faced in the translation process is an important step in the development of translation. This article is based on the content of Translation Ethics and In Other Words on ethical issues in translation, summarizing their core content and exploring ethical issues in translation.

Keywords

Translation; Ethics; The Role Of Translators

1. Introduction

Regardless of the given social context, as long as conflict persists and human rights and legal rights have yet to be perfected, the ethics of the translator, along with their political judgment, remain as crucial as cultural background and linguistic competence. The translator cannot escape the sense of moral responsibility that exists between themselves and others.

In fact, throughout the long history of translation, a unique set of ethical principles has gradually taken shape among interpreters and translators. These principles, or rather, these conceptions, are primarily intended to ensure that translators can assume a degree of responsibility when engaging with others or undertaking a given task.

In the final chapter of *In Other Words*, the concept of equivalence in translation is set aside in order to critically examine certain specific ethical choices and dilemmas that interpreters and translators may encounter in the course of their work. Given that no single code of conduct can accurately anticipate all the situations that may arise in the professional development of translation, and that no single code can be entirely relied upon, and given that it is in the interest of society as a whole for each

translator to take responsibility for their own translation actions, this chapter seeks to propose a critical thinking approach that can assist interpreters and translators in making ethical choices that are consistent with their own values.

2. Ethics and Morality

Ethics and morality typically refer to the capacity to make decisions based on an individual's understanding of what is morally good or bad within a given context. However, for those who subscribe to certain virtues, this definition may raise questions: ethics is not merely about knowing what one ought to do in a particular situation. For such individuals, it is more appropriate to focus ethics on a set of questions: "What should I do?", "What kind of person should I become?", or more specifically, "What kind of parent should I be?", "What kind of politician should I be?", "What kind of translator should I be?", and so on. These questions give concrete form to the ethical issues faced by individuals, thereby enabling professionals across various fields to gain a deeper understanding of their own professional ethics.

In fact, when we speak of the influence of one person on another, we are referring to the impact of one individual's values on those of another. For a child who has not yet begun formal schooling, the greatest influence on their values is undoubtedly their parents. In such a case, the values the child exhibits could be seen as a reflection of their parents' values. As the child grows older, the environments they encounter—and the values conveyed within those environments—become increasingly diverse. Taking this preschool child as an example, it is clear that their own values are inseparable from those of their parents and relatives. This is precisely why the distinction between self and other is never straightforward.

In *In Other Words*, the author supports the view of ethics as collective, encompassing the conscious formulation of norms and principles intended to guide the behaviour of those who are obliged to follow them. This collective characteristic is increasingly aligned with the professional and institutional contexts in which translation takes place. This explains why various institutions and associations have codes of ethics rather than codes of morality.

3. Defining Ethics

Before offering a formal definition of ethics, the author draws a preliminary distinction between two approaches—teleology and deontology—within the context of making ethically informed decisions.

The deontological model is based on rules and tends to define ethics by reference to "what is inherently right", without considering the potential consequences of an action. Judging behaviour through such a lens often relies on factors such as duty, loyalty, and respect for human dignity. In contrast, teleology defines ethics by considering "what yields the best outcome". Utilitarianism, for instance, is a

teleological model that prioritizes the results of an action over what might be deemed morally right in principle.

Attempting to separate morality from ethics, or to confine ethical behaviour to the individual level, may lead to the conclusion that morality is merely a collection of subjective views–such as aesthetic judgments about whether something is elegant or beautiful. This perspective, known as relativism, manifests in a variety of forms.

Some relativists argue that different societies have different definitions of morality, and that understandings of morality also vary across historical periods. Therefore, it is impossible to make a single, definitive judgment about others based solely on prevailing social values. Extending this line of thought, some relativists maintain that while each individual possesses their own set of moral values, no one is obliged to make value judgments about the actions or views of others from their own standpoint. I believe this idea is profoundly insightful and one that everyone should take to heart. When making judgments about people or events, we should consider each case on its own terms and within its specific context, rather than relying on our own immediate moral or ethical values to make simplistic or arbitrary evaluations.

This line of thinking also appears in ancient Chinese thought. For instance, the notion expressed in *Master Lü's Spring and Autumn Annals* and *Dialogues of Confucius*–that one should not comment without understanding the full picture–reflects a similar idea. In reality, relativism only remains convincing when it does not encroach upon our actual lived experience. Take, for example, absolute relativism, a branch derived from relativism that holds that whatever exists within a given historical context–whether reasonable or not–has sufficient grounds for its existence. On the one hand, this extreme viewpoint can help people understand their current circumstances; on the other, it may inhibit the development of critical thinking and thereby hinder intellectual progress in society. If one were to endorse absolute relativism, for instance, one might, by extension, find justification for practices such as slavery or racial segregation–systems that, regardless of time, place, or political structure, should never be justified.

4. The Subjectivity of Translation Ethics and the Non-Neutrality of Translation

In Joseph Lambert's work Translation Ethics , the author repeatedly emphasizes that translation, as a form of social practice, cannot be entirely disentangled from the translator's own ethical and moral framework. In the fourth chapter, Lambert expresses doubt about the notion of the translator acting as a neutral mediator between two cultures. He argues that when conveying different types of information, a translator cannot maintain a position of complete impartiality.

Xu Jun (2003) points out that translation has four essential characteristics: sociality, culturality, symbolic conversion, and creativity. Throughout the translation process, decisions such as which method to adopt or how to refine the translated text are all

shaped by the translator's ethical and emotional sensibilities. Xu further notes that translation is a complex social activity involving multiple forms of interaction. Steward (1988) proposed that all cognitive and translational processes from source language to target language require the translator to first form an understanding of the content and then make corresponding judgments. However, many translators find it difficult to remain neutral in this process. Thus, translator neutrality should not be understood as an absolute concept.

In fact, with the ongoing development of self-media and the broadening of channels through which countries access information, subjective forms of translation have become increasingly common on the internet. Regardless of whether the translated titles or content circulating online are accurate, such instances reflect the non-neutral nature of translation. Subjective translation choices can also be observed in the dissemination of film and television content. For instance, the Indian film originally titled *Dangal* was released in Chinese as *Wrestling Dad*, the German film *Unsere Mutter, unser Vater* became *Our Fathers*, and the film *She's the Man* was translated as *Football Darling*. Such shifts in content reflect the values of the translators behind them, revealing that translators cannot achieve true objectivity by setting aside their own perspectives.

5. The Changing Role of the Translator

In *Translation Ethics*, the author traces the evolution of the translator's role, describing a progression from a passive figure to an intermediary and, ultimately, to an active participant. When translators occupy a relatively passive position, they tend to support the idea that the translator's work should remain invisible and that neutrality should be maintained. Over time, the translator's role shifts towards that of an intermediary, involving deeper engagement in the processes of language dissemination and communication−translators working in medical rehabilitation, for instance, often assume such a role. Later, the translator's role evolves further from that of intermediary to what might be described as an active agent. At this stage, translators are frequently characterized as facilitators or advocates.

Xu Jun (2003) discusses the traditional positioning of the translator's identity. He notes that as translation has progressed throughout history, different societies have gradually come to recognize both the function and significance of translation. During this process, the translator's identity has drawn widespread attention, and the role of the translator has begun to change. Broadly speaking, this transformation can be characterized as a shift from passive to active participation in translation activities, and from simply relaying textual content to proactively developing translation methods and theories that align with contemporary trends.

Li Min (2013) explores the historical evolution of the translator's role, examining the changing ethical characteristics of that role within the broader development of translation. Taking a chronological approach, Li argues that between the stage of

passive, reactive translation and that of active, creative translation, there exists an intermediate transitional phase. In this intermediate phase, translators possess a clear ethical awareness, and the role of the translator is no longer as invisible as before, as people gradually come to understand translation as a profession. Tracing the evolution over time, Li categorizes the characteristics of the translator's role into three phases: submissiveness, neutrality, and empowerment.

In fact, the translator is both a distinctly linguistic being and a profoundly social one, embodying these two dimensions simultaneously. In the process of translation, the resulting text is inevitably shaped by two sets of factors: internal linguistic conditions and external social circumstances. As the translator's social status changes, so too does the translation. When a translator holds a higher social standing, the linguistic characteristics of the translation become more pronounced. Conversely, the more socially embedded the translator's role becomes—that is, the greater the degree of socialization—the more pragmatically oriented the translation tends to be. Thus, the evolution of the translator's role is shaped by broader social development and transformation (Zhou Lingshun, 2022).

Building on this theoretical foundation, scholars have proposed an integrated evaluation model based on "truth-seeking" and "utility-attaining", forming a dual-centre evaluation system that combines both translator-centred and society-centred perspectives (Zhou Lingshun, 2022). The concept of "translator role-playing" has also been introduced to describe the choices translators make to adapt their social role in alignment with the demands of the translation task. This process of selection is influenced by both the translator's own subjective factors and objective elements within the social context (Zhou Lingshun, 2014). Ultimately, the choice to assume a particular social role is largely driven by the need to meet certain social expectations, and the roles a translator adopts are determined by their own subjective understanding of the situation (Ma Dongmei and Zhou Lingshun, 2020).

6. The Ultimate Purpose of Translation

When discussing the purpose of translation, people often first consider the ultimate goal of the profession and its function. However, as is repeatedly emphasized in Translation Ethics, the act of translating cannot be entirely separated from ethics and personal emotion. On this basis, it becomes clear that the ultimate purpose of translation is inherently tied to the translator themselves. The purpose of translation is necessarily encompassed within the translator's own objectives. Chesterman, for instance, put forward the creative view that the ultimate purpose of translation implies the translator's own desires. Different individuals naturally offer different interpretations of what the purpose of translation entails.

Sun Yanbing (2019) notes that in translator-led translation processes, a range of constraining factors—such as the translator's own cultural background, social environment, and personal competencies—can all affect the final outcome of the

translation.

Zhang Bisheng (2024) explores translator subjectivity in the context of scientific and technological translation during the late Ming dynasty. He observes that when translating Western scientific works during this period, translators did not simply replicate the original content. Rather, they selected translation methods and content that were better suited to the understanding of contemporary readers, drawing on factors such as their own familiarity with the works, the prevailing domestic context, and the educational level of the readership.

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