

Translational ethics and electronic technologies

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Here we will model some simple relations between ethics and mediation technologies such as email, the Internet, and translation memories, all of which are radically transforming the translation profession. Our concern will be with the wider, philosophical sense of ethics as a set of problems concerning social relations. We will not be particularly worried about professional codes of ethics, with deontology, understood here as sets of rules established by professional associations in particular times and places. We are happy enough that the deontological exists. Yet it is not on that level that electronic technologies present the problems that concern us.

A basis in fidelity

A traditional ethics of translation is founded on the notion of fidelity. The translator, we are told, should be faithful to the source text, or to the source author, or to the intention of the text or author, or to something in that general direction (two thousand years of translation theory and deceptive prefaces have given us many variants). Whatever the nature of that fidelity (faithful like a dog to its master?, or like a person with faith?, or even like someone acting badly but in good faith?), some broad strokes might paint a general ideology since the Renaissance:

- Fidelity traditionally concerns the *individual* translator, usually in a relation with the individual text or author.
- The thing to which the individual translator is ideally faithful is on the *source* side of business, not on the target or receiver's side.
- Beyond those two constraints, the translator would have little scope for independent action; one's hands are apparently tied by the very nature of the profession.

The ethics of fidelity has been handed down through the ages as a series of humility tropes, designed to relieve the translator of much individual responsibility. Interestingly, the above features are generally not to be found in medieval discourses on translation, where teamwork was the norm, authors were either collective or absent, and target-side acceptability mixed with source-side slavishness in accordance with the nature of each task. The features of personal submissiveness to the source *are* found, however, in Étienne Dolet's *La Maniere de bien traduire d'une langue en autre* of 1540, and in the subsequent Renaissance tradition. Dolet assumed that the translator was an individual acting

individually (he talks about *the* translator); he attributed that subject with the knowledge and capacity to reproduce source features (“il faut que le traducteur entende parfaitement le sens et matière de l’auteur qu’il traduit”). Dolet thus bet on a notion of fidelity that was to be turned against him. Famously, he was burned at the stake for adding three words to Plato. Such might be the ethics of fidelity in action. It always incurred the risk of being taken too seriously.

Against fidelity

The ethics of fidelity is no longer highly fashionable in translation theory, much as it continues to be a fact of social preconceptions of the translator’s task. Fidelity is going out of style thanks to the following set of factors, possibly among others:

- Translation projects are increasingly done in teams, bringing together translators, terminologists, revisers, technology engineers, DTP experts, project managers, and even an author and client or two. In such situations, the individual translator is no longer responsible in any sovereign way.
- A growing amount of translation works from “authorless” texts, produced by teams in successive drafts and rewrites (we might think here of document-production processes in EU institutions). This means there is no longer any one author to whom the translator might be faithful.
- Putting the above together, teamwork and rewriting processes can be seen before, during and after the intervention of the translator. This means that translation is increasingly used as an integral part of the document-production process, rather than as a secondary, derivative moment. In such situations, the principles governing translation cannot be separated from those governing government document production in general. The ethics of translation becomes an ethics of cross-cultural communication. And that frame is rather broader than traditional fidelity.

The impact of those changing conditions is most obvious in the fields now freely called “localization” rather than “translation”. In the adaptation of software, product documentation and websites, fidelity is no longer an adequate ethical frame. Those fields, most obviously, are the ones that most use electronic tools in their text production processes. Simple tools like email, instantly updated online glossaries, FTP and the like make complex teamwork processes possible. Translation memories impose collective consistency on individual fantasy. And the general techniques of language engineering allow “internationalization”, understood here as a set of pre-translational processes that prepare a textual product for subsequent translation into many languages. The technologies, more than any postmodern condition of the soul, have removed the basic categories of fidelity even before the ethics can be called upon to operate.

New ethics for new times

Translation theories have generally been slow to react to these changes. Indeed, if there are new ethical principles guiding the translation process, they tend to have been developed from within the language professions themselves. The principles are then channeled into

written theory, usually by the (few) theorists that bother to look closely at contemporary professional practice. Let us consider a handful of such connections.

Collective responsibility

Perhaps the most radically new ethical principle can be sought at the unseen heart of one of the examples we have used above: the institutions of the European Union. The bureaucratic notion of collective responsibility is so radical that it led to the resignation of the entire Commission (amid the general disinterest of European nations). The same principle logically means that translators are never individually responsible for the mistakes they make. As soon as the translator is a member of the bureaucratic staff, on the inside rather than the outside, all their mistakes are the responsibility of all the translators. The role of the individual is thus absorbed by a highly selected professional space, just as the role of the profession itself is integrated into the one complex bureaucratic service function. The English section of the European Commissions' Translation Service is increasingly engaged in text revision processes, becoming a bureau of scribes rather than translators in any strict sense. As we have argued, this blurring of boundaries is a consequence of technology (the EU institutions make wide use of electronic communication, intranet, and translation memories). That blurred team-working finds its ethical correlative in collective responsibility. The principle may not solve many of the problems created by electronic technologies, but it has certainly proved effective at hiding quite a few of them (the myth of translation memories radically lowering costs by increasing productivity, for example).

The primacy of purpose

What has come to be known as *Skopostheorie* generally holds that “translational action is determined by its purpose [*Skopos*]” (Reiss & Vermeer 1984: 101). With one fell swoop, this proposition cleans away the entire set of source-side constraints. The translator is seen as carrying out an action, and the purpose of that action is to produce a text that has to fulfill a function, mostly on the *target* side of business. On this view, fidelity can only mean subservience to the purpose of the translation, which is more likely to be defined by a client or a potential future user than by any source text or author. The translator's ethical obligation then becomes to achieve that purpose, using their specific professional expertise. If we are translating instructions on medicines, our purpose is to ensure that the medicine is taken correctly. Our professional (and legal) responsibility is to that point of end use, no matter what the text we are working from. If adaptations are deemed necessary for the purpose, then we must adapt. If non-translations are necessary, then non-translation becomes an ethical procedure. This perspective thus opens new space for ethical activity, no longer restricted by fidelity-based notions of translation. In the theorizing of Just Holz-Mänttari (1984), this space is called “translational action”, embracing much more than just producing translations (all kinds of adaptations are included, along with things like managing relations with clients).

As an approach to ethics, however, one hesitates to see *Skopostheorie* or the associated theory of translational action as supplying complete answers. Like bureaucratic collective responsibility, they rely on a mystic of expertise. Translators work to the limits of their profession, and that is all. Beyond that, in the space where one might want to judge or prioritize different translational purposes, the theories are existentially mum.

Loyalty to people

Working from within the framework of *Skopostheorie*, Christiane Nord (1997, 2001 and elsewhere) has proposed that the notion of fidelity be complemented by the idea of “loyalty”. On this view, fidelity has been essentially a question of texts, of what is written or said. Loyalty, on the other hand, would be a feature of the socio-professional relationships that the translator has with people. This proposal would bring no really new fruits if it were limited to source-side disputes, since the notion of auctorial intention has long posited a subjectivity that should carry more weight than the merely linguistic organization of text (loyalty would thus be involved in something like the principle of interpretative “charity” formulated by Quine). Nord, however, stresses that the translator has socio-professional relations not just with authors (indeed quite rarely with authors) but also with clients and text-users, the people who actually have to do something with the translation. Loyalty should ideally be to all these people. The resulting complexity goes well beyond anything contemplated by the traditional ethics of fidelity. Ethics becomes a dynamic, evolving set of problems involving multi-lateral and multi-leveled relations between people.

Nord’s principle of loyalty is like general *Skopostheorie* in that it is unable to judge or prioritize individual purposes. It thus cannot offer guidelines in situations where the translator has to choose between divided loyalties, perhaps to a client (who wants one kind of translation) and actual end user (who might need quite another kind, to the best of the translator’s judgment). The translator might timidly propose an alternative strategy; the client gruffly refuses it; should the translator then accept the job? As broad principle, loyalty opens up an alternative to fidelity but cannot solve many real problems. It is not yet anything like a satisfying ethical approach.

Is Nord’s principle of loyalty, or indeed the underlying attention to purposes and action, in any way related to technology? Probably not in any direct sense. We have argued, of course, that our technologies are leading us toward teamwork, rewriting, authorless texts, and thus limits on the ideological sway of source-side constraints. That would indeed be one connection between the changing profession and these new approaches to ethics. More profoundly, however, theories of purposes, action and people might be seen as reactions *against* those same technologies. The more our texts become anonymous and complex, the more our work processes are dehumanized. The subsequent call for a human face (which is what loyalty seeks) seems a logical way of reducing complexity. That is more or less what we find in this set of approaches.

Human virtues

Similarly in search of human rather than technical values, the translation theorist Andrew Chesterman (1997, 2001) seeks an ethics of translation in the classical tradition of virtues, understood as qualities that we would expect a good professional (in this case a translator) to have. Chesterman proposes a small hierarchy of such values: truth, clarity, loyalty, trustworthiness and, underlying all others, understanding: “For a translator this is naturally a primary task: to understand what the client wants, to understand the source text, to understand what the readers can be expected to understand, and so on” (2001: 152).

As such, Chesterman's approach is certainly within the general search for human rather than technical values. It draws on *Skopostheorie*, action and loyalty, integrating their spaces into a classical framework. So what has happened to fidelity here? Part of it has become the call to loyalty; another part has perhaps become the translator's trustworthiness (here paraded as a highly conservative virtue: abide by the norms, and let people know when you deviate from them). But surely the major part of the role once accorded to fidelity is now invested in this term "understanding", traditionally applied to the source text and language (Dolet insisted that the translator understand both). Note, though, that the object of understanding is now plural: one should understand not just the text, but also the client and the end user. The virtue that was once one-sided (fidelity is indeed a classical virtue) has now become decidedly plural.

This plurality, if nothing else, is a response to a changing profession.

Ethics of resistance

The trend of contemporary theories is by no means unidirectional. As much as the above samples would appear to privilege target purposes over fidelity to the source, there are voices, mainly from literary and philosophical camps, devoted to arguing the opposite.

Schleiermacher (1838) separated translation proper from *Dolmetschen*, where the latter is understood as a commercial activity dominated by the presence of objects. In the field of *Dolmetschen*, the translator's dilemmas could be resolved by referring to the thing, the client, or the task at hand. For the noblest sense of translation, on the other hand, the dominant constraint should be the otherness of the foreign text. In that field, the translator would have the ethical duty to follow the source text as closely as possible, with the aim of "moving the reader toward the author". That broad position, invested with anti-commercial and decidedly non-technological ideologies, has remained with us to this day.

We find Schleiermacher's resistance in Antoine Berman's view of the translator "welcoming the foreigner" into the target language, recognizing rather than reducing the otherness of the other. For Berman (especially 1984), the translator's ethical task is to open up the target culture to the foreigner. In this sense, his approach might appear to be in keeping with the traditional discourse on fidelity. The difference, now, is that ethically valid translation could present itself as resistance to a long list of bad things (from expediency to nationalism to global capitalism). It could thus be seen as a principle with a noble social purpose.

Much the same arguments have been picked up by the American theorist Laerence Venuti (1995), who opposes ethically valid "resistant" translations to the dominant Anglo-American norm of "fluent" translations. For the early Venuti, the translator should stay close to the source text so as to open the target-culture norms to foreign expressions and values. In later versions of the theory (notably Venuti 1998), the aim becomes to use non-standard language, no matter what its provenance, so as to open the target language to the excluded minorities within it. That, however, is a resistant strategy that concerns the ethics of writing, not especially of translation.

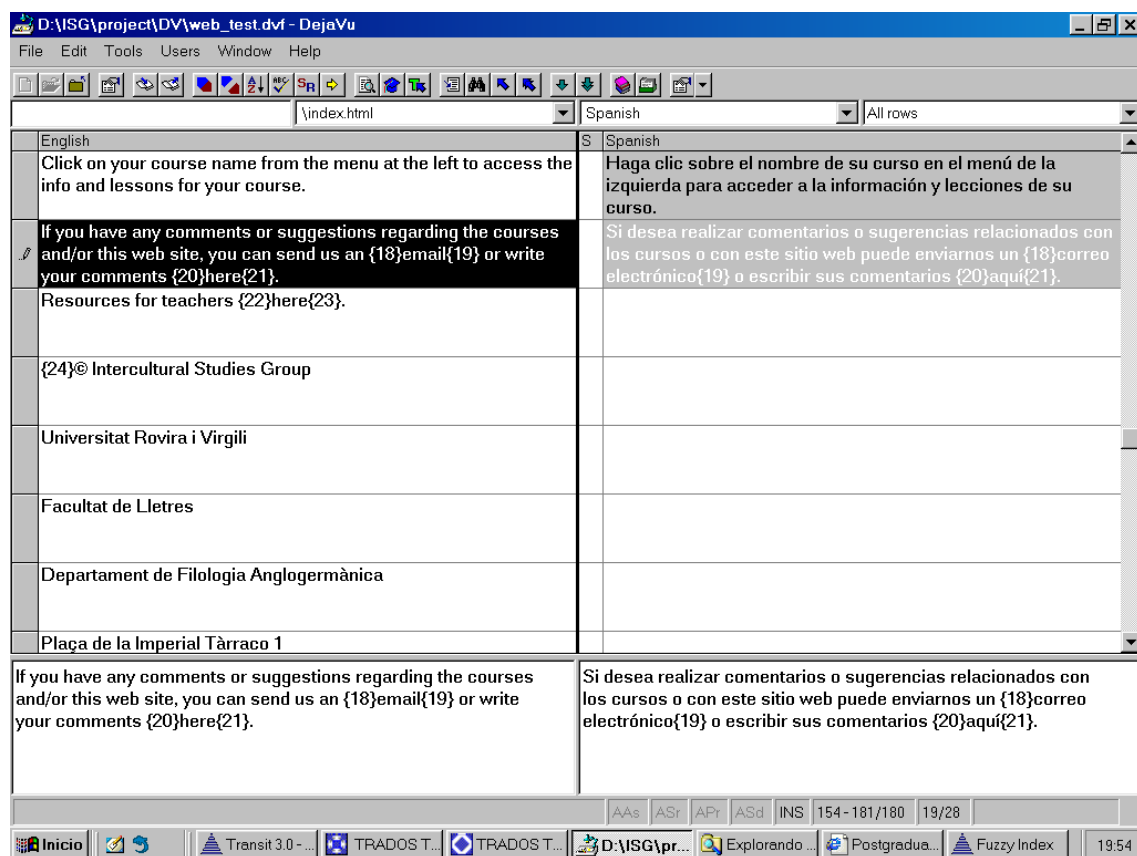
We mention these resistant strategies for one quite obvious reason. No matter how much they might be opposed to the expediency of the purposes, actions and loyalties that would radically adapt texts to new target cultures, no matter how much they appear to retain the formal structure of classical fidelity, their clinching arguments concern what sort of *target* culture one wants to create. And in this, if nothing else, they share the general

directionality and focus of most other contemporary approaches. We are now concerned, almost universally, with what happens on the target side. And if some of us occasionally relapse into talk about respecting the source text, it is inevitably because doing so will be ultimately beneficial for the target culture in some cunning way.

Seeing beyond technology

For all the above approaches, the translator has to make ethical decisions in view of quite a complex array of factors. One must be aware of not just the source text, but some kind of sending subjectivity, some kind of end purpose for the translation, some kind of paying client, ideally some kind of improvement to the target culture, and even more ideally some kind of improvement in the status of the translator's profession. Somehow, one has to see all of that, then decide.

How should translators think in such a way when all they can really see is something like the following?



The above is a webpage being translated with the translation memory suite DéjàVu. The technology helps the translator by removing all the visible formatting, dividing the text into fragments, hiding a lot of the fragments, and making the translator focus on getting the right-hand column to look like the left-hand column. If the translator does not get those pairs matched up, the pairs will not be saved for future use. And once those pairs are saved,

they become as anonymous as the producer of the source text, the translator, and indeed the end user. The technology reduces translation to the most primitive sense of fidelity imaginably: fidelity to words at sentence level, or smaller, with plurality and humanity condemned to the shadows.

Our point at this stage is quite simple. Most of our contemporary ethics oblige translators to see a wide range of factors, increasingly an array of human and cultural factors. At the same time, our language technology is removing precisely the same range of factors, ostensibly to keep translators focused on language-replacement exercises. This technology (but there is a bit of the same everywhere) reduces virtue to nothing but consistency and efficiency, since the translator who uses the memory is encouraged to keep looking back at what has been translated in the past (such is the function of memory). All the other virtues, indeed the whole range of recent reflections on ethics, are no longer in the domain of the technological translator.

In terms of translation theory, our technologies are sending us back more than twenty years. In the end, all our ethics will be stances of resistance.

Fidelity as memory

Memory is what the technologies are mostly supposed to help us with. That is what computers do: they memorize things. That is what the Internet does: it makes the collective retrieval of information almost automatic. And that is what translation memories do, of course: we remember previous translations.

What possible relation could there be between memory (the stuff of technology) and ethics (the stuff of principled action)?

In his longish *Short Treatise on the Great Virtues* (1996), André Comte-Sponville begins his discussion of fidelity, justement, with a reflection on memory. He considers the case of all of us who once said “I love you” to someone many years ago. Should we still love that person today, now that we have changed and they have changed perhaps even more? “Why should I keep yesterday’s promise since I am no longer the same today? Why indeed? Out of fidelity”, says Comte-Sponville, drawing on a respectable line of thinkers, “There is no moral subject without fidelity to oneself” (1996: 20-21). To be faithful to oneself, to the promise we made yesterday, we must remember who we were when we made the promise, to whom we made it, and why. Without memory, there is no fidelity, and without fidelity there is no moral subject on which to base the rest of the virtues.

This way of reasoning is old. Yet there is still something in it.

Our technologies now do the work of memory for us. The language of the past is thus taken away from its subjective contexts; it is stored; it becomes anonymous and dehumanized. Our relations with the other, across cultures in time and space, are remembered for us, and thus do not become part of us. A wholly technological culture will thus possibly not be able to constitute a moral subject for itself.

Our contemporary ethics want to break with the tradition of fidelity. The old is bad; what is new can be better. Translation theorists are correct to do so, if indeed fidelity means automatic or quasi-automatic text replacement. On the other hand, if fidelity is seen as an essential human quality, our ethics should perhaps not be so hasty in passing it by.

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