Questions on ethics (with a few answers)

On 24 September 2020, I gave an online seminar called *Translator ethics: From cooperation to risk and trust* for Hong Kong Baptist University. The discussion following the talk was based on unmoderated chat messages flashing past me on the screen, from which I was only able to fish out a few. I apologize for the fact that most of the messages received no reply.

The organizers of the seminar have since sent me the chat transcript. So to make amends, I offer here a set of short answers to most of the very good questions asked. (I have deleted the congratulatory comments, for which I nevertheless extend sincere thanks.)

Anthony Pym
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Andy SHEN: [With reference to the interpreter working between Trump and Putin] If this conversation enhances cooperative understanding, why shouldn't the interpreter reveal her notes for the public to be included in this cooperative situation?

Because then leaders would always be addressing their citizens (as eavesdroppers). I propose that there is a cooperative value in allowing leaders to have private conversations.

Saulo Alencastre: Japanese army interpreters probably didn't have the option to refuse the job.

An ethics can propose why a decision can be considered ethical or unethical. That is a little different from deciding whether a person is guilty, which is a legal notion. In many legal systems, guilt requires agency (i.e. that there was the possibility to do otherwise).

Andrea MUSUMECI: Dr Pym, do you think that elements such as censorship act as translational/translatorial constraints in the same way that audience requirements or linguistic requirements do?

Yes. (This was addressed in the seminar.)

Fatima Radhouani: As working for bad people, I happen to translate ideas and content that counter my attitude. It is like being caught up.

We all get caught up in content we don't like. It's part of the job, I suggest, and need not contradict ethical principles. Otherwise we live in ideological bubbles.

Chris Durban: A reluctance to manage risk in texts but also in translators' own business practices (counter-productive approaches to client acquisition) is something I've

commented on (and written about) in the professional community. Nice to see it mentioned here.

Ye Tian: Steiner talks about trust being the first thing of a translational hermeneutics doesn't he?

Yes, but that is trust in the meaningfulness of the ST. It is not interpersonal trust.

Meng Zhou: I have two questions concerning your ethics based on cooperation:
   (1) How do we measure cooperation and risk? after all, translators are not mathematicians.

Good question. Risk estimates are made all the time when we take everyday actions, in a "more or less" way, or by assuming that risk X is probably greater than risk Y. The measurements are always subjective and loose, but they are made nevertheless.

   (2) Your ethics in part resembles economics in that both presuppose rational agents who constantly calculate costs against benefits. However, translators in reality often make decisions without formal, rational reasoning. How does the ethics of "cooperation" apply in these scenarios?

The ethics of cooperation is indeed a guideline rationalism; it does not set out to describe actual decision-making processes. Economists are also aware that risk decisions involve emotions, traditions, and the weather, for example.

Silvina: I am interested in guidelines to replace codes of ethics for professional bodies.

Codes of ethics are worked out by communities of practice, who are the ones who have to use them. If something like a principle cooperation can feed into those discussions, then great. But that kind of connection is not necessary, and it would at best probably be in order to refine the reasons behind principles that are already recognized in the code of ethics.

Chris Durban: Anthony, we share many ideas and I certainly enjoy your verve and anecdotes, but can't help hearing "do as I say, not as I do" in a good part of your discourse on cooperation and ethics. Example: you've taken nuanced statements I've made and edited them selectively to present me as a binarism-embracer. Completely misrepresented my positions. Several times. Once I was even in the room when you did it in public – and you later admitted as much.
Was this ethical? Or perhaps just an academic thing, part of the "straw man debate" technique.
(I'm a translation practitioner, not an academic.)
This has eroded my trust, and I'm raising it here because I'd like to see a change in behavior.

Let's apply the theory: When someone produces empirical research and you call it "pseudo-research", then there is little probability of future cooperation with that person. The ethics of cooperation does not kick in.

Vicent Montalt: Can there be cooperation and trust without (some kind/degree of) truth?

Truth these days is in numbers – of deaths and planetary temperatures. The mistake might be to think that "telling the truth" solves all the problems. Complex facts have a low probability of reaching understandings. The classical example is vaccination. Do we tell parents the exact probabilities of their child dying from a vaccine? Usually not. Public authorities gain trust so that enough parents accept vaccination for there to be benefits for the whole community.
That is one reason why I think cooperation is the prime value to seek, not truth.

Ye Tian: If translators are not responsible for the content, then how do we look at the incident where Hitoshi Igarashi's been killed after his translation of "Satanic Verses"?

This is a difficult case. In a previous analysis of this case, I have accepted that the publishers and translators should have considered more carefully the effects of their translations – there was little cooperation to gained. This goes against the principle of free speech, which I also hold dear. But I recall being led by the logic of my own argument to consider that, in this case, there was little cooperation at stake.
That said, it is easy to condemn the attacks on the publishers and translators simply as a matter of law.
An equally interesting case is the publication of offensive material by the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo. There again, my gut reaction is to defend free speech, but my rationalist concern with cooperation suggests that it is not good to be stupid.

Carmen Ardelean: What about moral constraints when you translate a text you do not agree with (about politics, gender and other hot button issues)? Is the trust of your readers in the translator influenced by his/her decision?

Great question!
I accept that there are many situations in which we have to translate material we do not agree with and that we nevertheless agree to translate (in court, for example, but also great literature written by people with bad political opinions, for example). Will the readers still trust you? Yes, all the more so, I suggest, when the cooperation requires that those opinions be presented.
On the other hand, there are situations where the translator has a voice as a guide to the foreign and seeks trust as a guide. A translator might give informed access to great feminist writing, for example, or to the most reliable research on climate change. In such situations, trust is obviously going to be undermined by material that contradicts the translator's role as guide.
There are also situations where mediators are considered trustworthy because they are deontologically required to select appropriate material. The PRC code of ethics for journalists, for example, stipulates that the journalist should always present a positive image of China. Interestingly, the code of ethics for PRC translators does not state this. Implicitly, it recognizes that there are situations where the translator will and must convey uncomfortable material, lest we all live in the bubbles of our own beliefs.

Shane Forde: I was wondering if you see a distinction between interpreter ethics and translator ethics or do you believe the same general principles apply?

This was addressed in the seminar. In general, I think the same basic principles apply to the written and the spoken. That said, I think we need to extend the principles of spoken exchange across the board – to see written exchanges as conversations, for example. Scholars of written translation have a lot to learn from the practices of spoken translation.

Silvina: Is there a suggested replacement for the code of ethics for translators and interpreters for professional bodies?

No. Replacements or improvements are for the communities of practice to work out.

Hong JIANG: What's the relationship between the ethical responsibility of the publisher and the translator?

Good question. Publishers are increasingly seen as sharing the agency of the translator, under the aegis of "collaborative translation". There is a difference, though. Translators have access to the foreign language and culture, so they are being trusted to represent those vast unknown expanses. Publishers do not generally have that access, thus do not seek that kind of trust and are rarely considered trustworthy in that sense.

Putri Nurul A'la: I'm working on translating an anthropological book for my thesis, which many people claim this genre as 'white people public space'. Regarding the ethics, what if some parts of the contents are misleading because of the white people's ignorance? (e.g. historical accuracy, falsehood, force comprehension), should I rewrite it or leave it as is?

This was addressed in the seminar: Add an extensive preface, for instance.

Geraldine Brodie: How can your ethics of co-operation be applied to Machine Translation, where translator 'decisions' depend on data collection and algorithms?

MT gives us possible translations; it is part of the generative process. When we post-edit, we are making selections, and it is that moment of selection that I am hoping to address through a few principles of ethics.
In general, I think we need to work with MT in an active way, in a dynamic selective process, as good TM software invites us to.

Mehmet Şahin: With increasing reliance on automatic translation and translation tools, should we expect more ethical issues in target texts produced with the help of such tools?

I don't know. There are problems with sexist language, for example, since MT databases are drawn from patriarchy. But active post-editing can change that, then feed the changes into the database.

Shivarama Padikkal: Would you please respond to how nationalist ideologies and dividing sectorial thoughts affect cooperative understanding?

The ethics of cooperation is an attempt to break away from the ethics of "my country right or wrong". If cooperation is right, and non-cooperation is wrong, then they both exist in the act of communication, rather than in any one country.

WANG Yinying: Can you expand on your point on not focusing on the professionalism issue in T&I, especially given your background in sociology.

This was addressed in the seminar, although not very well, I admit. I think the important point is that translation is becoming a widespread social activity, well beyond the narrow interests of the people who are paid to translate and interpret. These days I am more interested in that wider social activity.

Saulo Alencastre: How do you define risk in translation?

Risk is the probability of not meeting success conditions. And success conditions are defined as enabling cooperation (i.e. benefits for all parties).

Mia: Would you please elaborate more on "Cooperation does not assume Neutrality"? As Impartiality is one of the principles that we have to abide by.

Most codes of ethics, written with courts in mind, do require neutrality of some kind. But we know that language use is never transparent to the world, so strict neutrality is impossible to obtain except for things like numbers, fixed terminology, deaths, and rising temperatures. More important, cooperation says that there must be benefits for all parties, including the translator. So some translator decisions can be expected to legitimately be for the translator's benefit. Hence no strict neutrality, for those two reasons.

Eva Seidl: How do your points made in this talk affect language teaching for translation students?

I don't know. I am more interested in the role of translation in additional (i.e. L2) language learning. I think all additional language learning should include a translation component, not as a check on acquisition but as a dynamic set of skills in its own right.

Emanuela Moretto: Anthony, I am in Sydney, and obviously I have been following all the debate surrounding QUALITY OF TRANSLATION during COVID-19. To be honest, when I read about "minor mistakes", I thought your stance was typical Anglocentric (sorry!). I am absolutely thrilled and totally content I joined in tonight. thank you!

So why would recognition of "minor mistakes" be particularly Anglocentric? I am intrigued.

Sahar Hazem: What shall be done if I accepted a task and then i found that the speech or the content is totally against my morals and it gives wrong information according to my beliefs for example.

So if you are an interpreter in court, you will refuse to render the words of a witness because you don't like what they are saying? And if you are translating an opinion piece, you will omit all comments that criticize your beliefs? So the people listening to you will only hear the world that you like? I suggest a better strategy is to refuse the task at the beginning. If that can't be done, then some ethical suffering may be called for.

Carmen Ardelean: If the translator / interpreter is an excessive risk-taker, how does this affect the trust of readers / audiences?

Great question again! I want translators to take more risks; I want translations to be less boring, to be events that generate interest and involvement in cultural alterity. To do that, a lot of trust has to be generated beforehand, usually by a very visible translator/author.

Another strategy is to work in situations where receivers have access to a more risk-averse translation or are aware of it. Watch a firebrand evangelical preacher for example: they will often start from the King James Bible and then give successive translations of it in the spoken vernacular until the reading is close to people's lives.

If there is already a risk-averse translation available, we can take more risks in an alternative translation.

Chris Durban: See -- Anthony is doing it RIGHT NOW: presenting me as a binary person.

Ye Tian: With translation, there's cooperation. But aren't there "secrets" within any community that they are reluctant to share with others but cannot hold it back as soon as translation comes into the play?

This was addressed in the seminar. Secrets are sometimes revealed not in the name of truth, but to promote benefits for all parties. An intriguing example is the case of Indigenous knowledge being revealed as part of a claim to land rights.

Chris Durban: Very interesting blogpost on attractive segments of the global market by Kirti Vashee here: https://kv-emptypages.blogspot.com/2020/08/the-premium-translation-market-hiding.html

Janus Li: Hi Anthony, in light of the current COVID-19 situation, if a foreign national refuses to identify themselves according to the host country's official translation of their identity, how would you approach such a problem? Do you think the cooperative theory can solve this? Since the idea of crisis translation is to empower the minorities to have timely, accurate, trust communication with the authority.

I'm not sure I understand the situation. One would hope some kind of basic identification is in the interests of both the authority and the minority, to seek cooperation in the matter at hand.

Wei Zeng. Could you please say something more about the point that translators are not responsible for the contents of the translation for we have the right to choose the texts in most cases, especially when they are translated out of academic purposes?

This is a difficult point. I propose that translators are not responsible for what is said in the translation: it is wrong to kill the messenger simply because the message is bad. Yet translators are responsible for how *the message is expressed. And that work on the "how" should, I propose, be in search of mutual benefits.*

Now, to the extent that translators can refuse an assignment, they can have greater responsibility with regard to the outcome. To that extent, they can be considered responsible for how the content contributes to cooperation, although still not for the content itself. (See my comments on The Satanic Verses *somewhere around here.)*

In terms of the Western translation form, translators are still not authors (and I'm still sorry about that).

Chris Durban: An interesting ethical issue for students and young people is linked to *how to know when you are ready to translate professionally* -- everyone seems to tippytoe around this.

Giulio Serripierri: Dr. Pym, would you agree that deprofessionalisation is contributing to translation errors such as the one in the Australian media, therefore jeopardising cooperation?

I would certainly agree if I had information about deprofessionalization. I do not think there is any significant deprofessionalization in Australia, due to the NAATI accreditation system, but I could be wrong.

Another form of deprofessionalization concerns volunteer translators, who are often experts in the field concerned. I am reluctant to associate volunteers with necessary errors.

Fatima Radhouani: Coming back to Kayoko Takeda's book interpreters and war crimes to be published in 2021. Many interpreters were actually murdered in Iraq, many more are running risks. Do you think this is related to trust or to lies?

Lies are everywhere, except in deaths and rising temperatures. The problem you evoke seems to have more to do with risk and trust. Interpreters in war zones have to calculate the risks involved (and this is more or less the conclusion to Kayoko's book) and they presumably are very aware that they are working for one side rather than the other.

Much as I want translators to take more risks, I do not want them to risk getting killed.

Vanessa Enriquez Raido: Great to see you wearing the 'Community Hat' more firmly than ever before, Anthony. It is indeed very desirable to develop and share evolving notions of translation as rooted in different (speech) communities.

A few comments on this were made in the seminar. I'm not sure I am entirely new to the community hat. True, I have heavily criticized a few scholars who have great political opinions but reprehensively sloppy arguments, but don't confuse the technical side of our work with underlying beliefs.

Ye Tian: Not only people's own purpose of learning languages, but what the authorities want in educating their people (immigrants included) a second language.

A participative community needs a shared language, so I have nothing against that kind of coercion coming from above. But it should not mean losing one's L1: the more language skills in a community, the better it can cooperate with other communities.

Mia: Follow up question: So, how can I not get myself into trouble by breaking the Code of ethics eg Impartiality?

Codes of ethics are being broken all the time since there are many different translation situations and most codes are written with only a handful of situations in mind. Avoid trouble, by all means, but do not believe in rules for the sake of rules, I suggest.

万菊：Could you conclude the relationship between cooperation, risk and trust in translation?

A translation may be considered successful if it enables cooperation between all participants (i.e. mutual benefits). Translators manage the risks of that aim not being obtained. In order for them to do so, the other participants have to trust translators.

Barbara Spicer: Cooperation and mutual gains important in translation process research too - I see my literary translator as an equal and co-participant in my PhD research following her translation of a contemporary novel from Spanish into English via remote observation.

Great point! I try to tell this to my research students: subjects help us do research, so we must make sure our research is of use to them (and is communicated to them). It should be one of the basics of action research.

Yuhao Liu: Thank you, Professor Pym. I want to ask to what extent does a translator have the autonomy to decide what to translate or what not, in an ethical way.

This is a good question, but not a question that ethics can address. As in any economic activity, we can refuse if we have viable alternatives to turn to. If not, then not. The ethics of cooperation can help us think about whether to accept a task, but its other principles (risk, trust) only apply after the task has been accepted.

Mutiara Yasmin: What assessment(s) do you think can/should be included by professional certification bodies in the area of ethics when assessing (and then, certifying) a translator's professional quality?

Good question. The NAATI exam presents three situations involving ethical dilemmas. The candidate has to select two of the three and then say what the translator should do and why. (The reasons can usually principles stated in the NAATI Code of Ethics.) I think this arrangement is as good as any, except that many candidates seem to have failed it and are not told why.

Shane Forde: Of course prefaces are not possible in interpreting.

Agreed! You can sometimes have a word to a few people over coffee, if you're lucky.

Piotr Blumczynski: Could you comment on trust as a 'transferrable' phenomenon (and the implications for translators and interpreters): don't we trust those who are trusted by those we trust? I mean, doesn't trust work more as a rhizomatic than linear configuration?

Yes indeed. In our historical work, we can usually identify networks of trust, the configuration of which seems to depend on how thick or thin the trust is.

That said, I do not want to identify trust with simple predictability, in the sense of knowing someone well. For me, trust involves the risk that the person trusted might be incompetent or could be working for the other side.

Annukka Jakkula: Have you ever observed agency of translation processes in organisations' strategy work - and in creating dedication to the strategy? An interesting process in ethical terms.

In the seminar, I mentioned the extensive planning done for translation at the Olympic Games, and I have written on this. In the case of COVID19 information in Australia, the planning of translations has certainly been inadequate in terms of time delays and reaching the most vulnerable (people in age care institutions tend not to go online), although better policies were quickly adopted.
The ethics of this intrigues me, since the pressure from the press drew attention to translation and resulted in more funding and better planning. Yet I still wonder whether the outcries in the press helped undermine trust in translators.

Chris Durban: Could you comment on the ethics of truly well-intentioned teachers who help their students set up "translation agencies" to interact with real clients in the outside world? Is this to be encouraged (exposure) or discouraged (premature)?

Chris Durban: (FWIW, I can see both sides and sympathize with students who so desperately need experience.)

Giulio Serripierri: As interpreting students we are trained to let the other speaker know when there are side conversations, eg asking for clarifications.

That is a good principle and it is in the NAATI code of ethics in Australia (int10). It is not the same thing as conversations between the witness and the translator in court, where the translator should not appear to be assisting the witness.

Sahar Hazem: What shall be done if I accepted a task and then i found that the speech or the content is totally against my morals and it gives wrong information according to my beliefs for example?

In a written text, you can signal wrong information in a footnote or preface. In a speech, you can use omission for low-stakes items (unintentional slips) or use correction if and when you are paid to do so. But I do not think you can stop half-way through just because you personally just realized that the words do not correspond to your beliefs. We all need to engage with beliefs other than our own. If not, we live in a bubble of limited cooperation.

Eva Ng: Can you please explain how the cooperation can be applied in a dilemma faced by the interpreter in a situation like speaker mistake, such as the mistake made by President Xi in the G20 summit a few years ago? The interpreter omitted the mistake, obviously to save the face of the speaker - President Xi - Does the cooperation theory apply here? In so doing, the interpreter is violating her code of ethics to be accurate in her interpretation. So does that mean being cooperative is more important than being ethical? In Trump's interpreter case, it is the ethics that prevailed, didn't it? I wonder what would happen if the Democrats succeeded in getting the Congress to subpoena the interpreter to testify in court about what was said between the closed door between Trump and Putin?

Good question, Eva. I am trying to formulate an ethics that does not require accuracy for accuracy's sake: enhancing cooperation is being ethical, for me. I also allow that mediators protect their own benefits, which might be one good reason for correcting your boss's mistakes.
I think that if Trump's interpreter had testified, we would lose the institution of private conversations between leaders.

Janus Li: That's diplomatic interpreting, they normally represent national interests, Chinese official interpreters in particular.

Yes, but the argument is then that international cooperation is served by each country's position and interests being made as clear as possible. This is a valid reason for correcting presidents.

Wei Zeng: With the increasing demand for translation activities in our society, Translation has appeared as a professionalism. However, limited by some factors such as time requirement and also uneven proficiency in translation, the translation is presented with visible errors, especially public signs. How should we consider such errors in the translation of public signs? Also, how do you view the relationship between the translators' motive and translation ethics? If the translator is aware that he/she is not proficient enough to deal with the translation, but he/she accepts and it ends up with a terrible translation. In this case, how do you view the relationship between the translators' motive and translation ethics? Thanks for your reply!

I increasingly think that non-professional translation is a good thing for our societies. People benefit from greater access to information beyond their own language. If the result is a few

laughable translations on public signs, I'm happy to be amused. There is no ethical problem there for me.
The ethics of cooperation kicks in when there are negative consequences for one of the parties. For example, a university I know used lamentable English translations on its website. When those translations mean a drop in international enrolments, then there is a good ethical (and commercial) reason for paying a professional to produce more attractive translations.

Eva Seidl: How can we address your points in language classes for translation students?

I don't know. My interest is in communicative translation activities as a part of additional-language learning.

Vicent Montalt: Can there really be cooperation and trust without (some kind/degree of intersubjective, intercultural) truth?

Very much so. You and I trust that a euro can buy a coffee at the university cafeteria (if you're lucky), but the value of that piece of metal is a fiction: there is not enough gold to back it up. Cooperation and trust can operate entirely on the basis of fictions, of which translation equivalence is one. The only requirement is that the fictions be believed in – this is Bourdieu's illusio, necessary so that any social system can function. Unfortunately, the fictions crumble when mutual benefits are not attained (see the history of tulips and of housing prices in Spain, for example – truth lies in numbers and death).
In a medical situation (since Vicent teaches medical translation), mutual benefits are not obtained when harm is done, for example, which is why it is the first principle of the Hippocratic Oath.

Bei Hu: How to encourage translators to take immediate risks (breaking literalism) and look for long-term benefits (cooperation), especially when the future reward is not clear? (More reception studies?)

In the training situation, one can create activities that force risks to be taken, for example when an audiovisual translation has to be made of a written text. That is, we encourage translators to think about alternative ways of translating and to try them out.
Reception studies can help to the extent that they might show translators how boring their translations can be and how difficult it is to really engage receivers in a communicative act.

Andrea MUSUMECI: Could you please explain how was Microsoft Word used in the TAP experiment?

Just get students to use the Dictate tool in recent versions of Word. (Don't worry – they are younger than us and better at all technologies.)

Shane Forde: If we accept the suggestion that cooperation should be the guiding principle for the translator/interpreter, how do we gain the trust of the commissioner of the translation when they are ceding power to the translator/interpreter to decide what is cooperative?

I do not think the translator has lone responsibility to decide what is cooperative. The client (or commissioner, if you will) has already made some implicit calculation of probable benefits. The translator may try to alter that calculation on the basis of their specific knowledge. If that is the case, the client is forced to trust the translator to the extent that the specific knowledge (the foreign language, for example) is unknown to them. If they are not prepared to extend that trust and enter into negotiation with the translator, then the translator should not proceed with the translation.

Shane Forde: In that sense then Codes of Ethics are undermining this trust because they are undermining this principle?

I'm not sure which principle is being referred to. Most codes of ethics are based on what Andrew Chesterman describes as

Janus Li: Hi Anthony, how do you think the cooperative theory applies to crisis translation?

I defer to Sharon O'Brien, who has studied the problem.

Sharon O'Brien: A very high level of cooperation is required! Transmitting information in specific languages is not very effective because the recipients either don't trust it or do not use the channels where the content is published.

So you were there all the time, Sharon! I should have simply given the floor to you!