

Translating as risk management

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Abstract

Risk analysis can be applied to translation in several ways. One application concerns the specificity of translation, where risk is the probability of losing a translation-specific kind of credibility; it concerns relations between people and can be called 'credibility risk'. A second kind of risk ensues from the translator's uncertainty when making decisions about how to render an item; it involves cognitive processes and can be called 'uncertainty risk'. A third kind of risk then has to do with the way texts are interpreted and used in contexts, where some elements are high-risk because they are key to communicative success, while others are low-risk; this kind of risk applies to the different parts of texts and can be called 'communicative risk'. This third sense of risk then allows for a rationalist model of translators' decisions and effort distributions, positing that high effort should be invested in text items with high communicative risk. Although the differences between these levels of analysis can be confusing and require some careful definitions, the interactions between them offer a rich, non-essentialist view of translation as a social relation, as a product, and as a teachable mode of decision-making.
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Twentieth-century Western theories of translation (which here includes spoken, written and audiovisual modes) can be seen in terms of a struggle between essentialist or Lockean views of meaning transfer, where one and the same thing is ideally uttered in different languages, and non-essentialist or deconstructionist views, where translation necessarily involves transformation of the thing uttered. Although various compatibilist positions have been envisaged, notably within the frame of relevance theory, no stable consensus has emerged around a unified view of translation. I propose that some of the theoretical tensions and occasional deadlocks can be resolved by drawing on the rich array of ideas offered by risk analysis, particularly when the translator's decision-making is seen in terms of risk management.

Risk analysis can be applied to translation in several quite different ways, and jumps between the levels can quickly become confusing. In proposing the framework for a general approach, I will attempt to keep the applications initially apart by focusing on three distinct questions: 1. What is the specificity of translation as a speech event? 2. How can different parts of a text become high-risk or low-risk when interpreted in specific contexts? and 3. How can a translator distribute effort in order to manage risk rationally when translating?

When those three broad questions are dealt with together, the resulting account of translation might be able to displace the central roles played elsewhere by concepts of equivalence, adequacy or fidelity, which have in the past done the work of identifying not only the specificity of translation, but also its ethical calling and guiding pedagogies.

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1. Credibility risk: defining the specificity of translation

A pragmatic approach to translation has relatively little trouble locating and naming the various discursive levels and relationships involved. Translation, in very broad terms, is just another speech event, and the general stock of terms and concepts developed in pragmatics can be used. What remains problematic, however, is the level at which translation manifests specificity within the general run of speech events.

The pragmatics of translation has provided fertile ground for speculative inquiry. Several theorists have argued that translation can be analyzed as a specific mode of reported speech (Bigelow, 1978; Mossop, 1983, 1987; Folkart, 1991; Pym, 1992), while others have investigated its status in terms of performatives (e.g. Pym, 1993; Robinson, 2003). Since those initiatives, it has become commonplace to assert that translation is a speech event, albeit described in various ways: a speech act, a text act, a performance, a situated utterance designed to have a communicative effect, an enactment of intercultural agency, a struggle with and against power, a transformation of language intended to bring about change in relations between cultures, and so on (for some of these see Tymoczko and Gentzler, 2002; Tymoczko, 2010; Morini, 2013; Venuti, 2013). Those views are well-intentioned and fine, yet they potentially concern *all* speech events, without any formal arguments identifying particular applicability to translation. What still remains problematic is the specificity of translation. After all, communication across languages can take place via reported speech as such, with as many additions, truncations, and explanations as you like, and much the same could be said of most kinds of multilingual conversations. Reported speech *becomes* translation at some point, and defining that point is not easy.

A traditional definition of that specificity, inherited from discourses of fidelity, relies on the concept of equivalence: the start¹ and target texts are held to maintain some relation of equal value on some level, and the work of several generations of translation scholars has been to identify the nature of that value (formal, semantic, functional, etc.). The paradigms of equivalence have nevertheless consistently conflicted with the inherent indeterminacy of translation, as manifested in the simultaneous viability of several different and equally valid renditions for the one start text (Quine, 1960/2013:27). When that indeterminacy is seen in terms of deconstruction, the various proposed definitions of translation are shown to suffer from essentialist assumptions, be they based on stable value (in equivalence theories) or an accessible purpose (in theories that assume there is just one aim or *Skopos* at stake) (see Pym, 2009/2014:86–109). The application of relevance theory (notably in Gutt, 1991/2000) does incorporate significant indeterminism in its view of language as offering no more than “communicative clues”, yet it allows essentialist suppositions to creep in through the back door by assuming that the start text offers the translator clues about a determinate “intention”. In the same vein, attempts to introduce the notion of “similarity” (especially in Chesterman, 1996, 2005), ostensibly relaxing the criterion of equal value so that some degree of transformation is allowed for or indeed condoned, must still assume an essentialist equivalence in order to measure similarity. It is not an entirely satisfactory solution to the problem of how to define the specificity of translation while allowing for translative indeterminacy.

In sum, the various attempts to identify what is specific to translation have struggled to come to terms with the inherent contradiction between translation as repetition of utterance (defined by the assumption of equivalence) and translation as transformation of utterance (which reveals the assumed equivalence to be an illusion). To name the paradox as “equivalence in difference” (Jakobson, 1959/2000:114) by no means solves the problem; to name the illusion as a “presumption of complete interpretative resemblance” (Gutt, 1991/2000:196) does much better – I want to build on it – but has little to say about the indeterminacy that spawns the illusion.

Within the analytical approaches that *have* actively recognized the indeterminacy of translation, the resulting recommendations similarly do not really rise above the level of homespun morality: Davidson (e.g. 1973/1984) broadly claimed we use ‘charity’ or ‘rational accommodation’ (give the other the benefit of the doubt; understand what you think they should have said; assume they are self-consistent), while a later Quine (1990:42, and especially 1995) preferred ‘empathy’ (given that the other may be evil or a learner, or otherwise possibly unlike us, we should merely try to see the world from their perspective). One can take or leave such platitudes; they do not constitute a consistent theoretical solution to the problem of specificity.

So how might we attempt to replace equivalence and yet retain translation?

1.1. Assumptions about translation

In previous work on this problem (e.g. Pym, 1992/2010:67) I have broadly posited, like Gutt, that equivalence should be treated as an operational social fiction, a belief structure. I see this illusion as a convenient shared assumption, much in

¹ I prefer the term ‘start text’ rather than ‘source text’ for technical reasons that have little to do with the current topic. These days translators work not just from a single text but also from glossaries, translation memories, and machine translation output, and any one of those resources could provide the ‘source’ for a solution. The role of the initial text is thus relativized; it is no more than the starting point for the translation process. Hence ‘start text’, which is, after all, what is regularly said in neighboring languages: *Ausgangstext*, *texte de départ*, *texto de partida*, *testo di partenza* (see also Pym, 2011:92).

the way that the value of banknotes works as an illusory assumption necessary for the operation of a monetary system that no longer has a gold standard. Here I will stay with that general approach: there exists a social fiction, a 'willing suspension of disbelief' (as Coleridge put it), that posits that a translation, because it is a translation, has the same value as an anterior text, on one level or another.

I hesitate to assume that this assumption is in any way universal. Instead, I make the claim that it is a feature of a particular translation form, notably the one that has been dominant in Western print cultures since the Renaissance.² This Western translation form, which may have spread over the globe as a fellow traveler of modernity in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, technically requires a minimum of only three operational maxims – similar to Toury's three 'postulates' (1995/2012:29–30)–, which must be made at the same time: (1) that there has been a crossing from one language to another, (2) that the first person of the resulting translation refers to an author, not a translator (this is the 'alien-I', also found in the utterance of actors, for example), and (3) that the length of the translation is co-variant with the length of its start text. These simple maxims work in the way that maxims function in Grice (1975): they are sufficiently embedded in our social discourse to produce meaning effects when not complied with. Pseudotranslations abound; translators can invest much of their own voice in the alien-I; editors and translators can play with significant changes to text length; but in the Western tradition these things are done against the background of a dominant translation form, which remains relatively unaffected by such instances of non-compliance.

The maintenance of that form is what I would now like to approach in a slightly new way. I will not seek to add anything substantial to the above analysis of assumed equivalence and the three maxims – their textual manifestations seem obvious enough and have been debated in very repetitive ways for several centuries. What concerns me here is the ways those illusions are *created* and *protected* as the specificity of translation. It is in that *performative* side of business that there might be something new to say.

1.2. Risk of what?

Risk, some etymologies tell us, is firstly a risk of loss, of failure: when you perform a high-risk action, you could lose your money, your clients, your job, or all those things at once. Derivations can take us back to *ρίζα* and *riscus*, for rocks and cliffs bordering sea (*risco* in Spanish), dangers for navigators to avoid. In the case of translation, the nature of the rocks needs to be made a little more precise. What is the most calamitous way that translators can run aground? Since the Western translation form depends on a shared illusion, the worst thing that can happen is surely the shattering of that illusion: when the translator's communication partners no longer accept (possibly among much else) that there has been a language crossing, that the discursive first person belongs to a distant author, and that the length of the translation depends on the length of a start text, then the translator has lost the one thing that enabled the illusions in the first place: trust, or more exactly the attribution of credibility on these particular issues. Risk, in translation, is first and foremost risk of losing credibility. Let me call this 'credibility risk' (recalling the range of the Latin verb *credere*, to trust, to believe in, which brings in the risk of losing that 'willing suspension of disbelief').

Chesterman (1997) lists four kinds of ethical relationships at stake in translation: clarity, truth, understanding, and trust. Only trust, I suggest, is in any way germane to translation as the maintenance of a shared illusion, at least when understood as interpersonal trust (rather than institutional trust, for example). The rest are broad essentialist idealisms, since they conceptually involve measurements in relation to an idea of *absolute* clarity, *absolute* truth, and *absolute* understanding, rather than in relation to a fallible communication partner. As such, they have no reason to be shared, are not necessary for the formulation of translation maxims, and in any case remain conceptually incompatible with translation as a constant transformation of language, allowing for no transparency to absolute truth and understanding. Such essentialist ideals thus operate in a way that trust does not: you might say that you trust someone 'absolutely', but that attitude must always contain seeds of doubt, since it depends not just on your relation with the person or but also, perhaps more importantly, on *their* relation with you. Any speaker or writer, translating or otherwise, might aim to be clear, truthful and understandable, but the precarious maintenance of credibility, as a *shared* relationship based on trust, is what makes the production and reception sides of translation hold together.

Credibility is of particular pertinence to translation because the relations between translators, their clients and end-users are typically characterized by 'asymmetric information' (after Spence, 1973, applied to translation in Chan, 2008): the translator normally knows more about the foreign text and language than do the other parties. There are many reasons

² The historical contours of the Western translation form remain to be studied. Some indications are nevertheless found in histories of non-Western translation. For example, Trivedi (2006:116) notes "the absence of the practice and perhaps the very concept of 'translation' as it is understood in the West, in the early history of Indian literature." Tschacher (2011:27) observes that "[u]p to the eighteenth century, South Asian Islamic literatures seem to offer very little evidence of 'translations' in the narrow sense, as renderings of particular texts or passages thereof in the medium of another language." Sakai (2013) summarizes: "Prior to the eighteenth century, in Asia all sorts of methods were applied, but nothing that was like translation."

for turning to translators, but this is perhaps the most basic: they know some things that you do not. And this, of course, means that you often cannot control them in any close way, except by becoming a second translator yourself or by closely examining external signals of credibility (recommendations, experience, training). Because of this asymmetric information, translation has a special dependence on credibility.

Between translator, client and end-user, trust thus constitutes a kind of pact of mutual interest. Lose the credibility of the translator, and you lose everything else that goes with the translation. Without credibility, all the other possible objects of loss (clarity, truth and understanding if you like, but also satisfaction and happiness) have no status in terms of translation (they may still exist, but not in terms of translation as a speech event). And if the translation form is in some way beneficial for all parties, the loss of credibility will be a loss for all parties.

A true story: My client, a Spanish economist, phoned to say that I was surely not the one who had translated the sociological report – there were mistakes in it (“a town of two *thousand* inhabitants” had come out as “two *million* inhabitants,” since the Spanish ‘mil’, for thousand, looks like ‘million’ when you are tired, overworked and underpaid); she said I must have had the translation done by a student of mine. My credibility was lost. So the client, who naturally thought she knew English, revised the whole text and inserted 45 new errors. Two years later she returned, asking me to translate another report. In vain – I might have momentarily lost credibility as a translator, but she had more permanently lost credibility as a client, at least in my eyes. Trust has to be mutual.

This view of translation as a specific form maintained by credibility need not contradict any of the more traditional descriptors. ‘Fidelity’ and its technical avatar ‘equivalence’ still work as common ideas bolstering the trust relationship. There is still an illusory idealism at work. The main difference here is that the nature of the value is no longer assumed to be substantial; there is no question of actually testing the fidelity or equivalence in accordance with some ideal of precisely shared meanings. The idealism has now become an intersubjective *belief* held by the parties in a specific interaction. At the end of the day, the translation is a translation because the people buying and using the text *trust* it has been produced as a translation.

This may not seem like much of an advance on previous views. In some respects, I could be saying no more than Gideon Toury (1995/2012:27) did in his proposal that all translations are ‘assumed translations’, defined as “all utterances in a (target) culture which are presented or regarded as translations, on any grounds whatever”, with a circularity that is ultimately sophistic. Yet I am trying to say something a little different. First, as my illustrative anecdote should indicate, credibility is rarely absolute: in a situation of asymmetric information, the many unknown values create necessary doubt. You might trust a translator for as long as the text reads as expected, or for as long as it works, or when there is no information to the contrary, against the background possibility that your trust has been misplaced. In this field, trust is a wager, a bet, a calculation of relative *untrustworthiness*, a risk. Second, this particular kind of risk is not just a matter of avoiding danger; it becomes something more positive, something that can bring gains. Clients and end-users choose to trust translators because it would be too expensive or counter-productive to do otherwise, and it is thus a cost-saving device in itself – as the early Luhmann (1973) put it, trust is a mechanism for reducing systemic complexity. A translator might see this from the other side: I, translating, put precisely these things in the translation, and not others, so that you will trust me as a translator, and you will trust me as a translator not because what I say is clear, truthful or a correct understanding (you, receiver of the translation, have no way of judging such things) but because it is *cost-effective* for you to do so: if not, you will have to find an alternative mediator, or start learning languages, or enter into the greater uncertainties of automatic translation technologies, where there are many hidden reefs on which to run aground.

One final note on credibility risk: it need not involve translators becoming in some way ‘invisible’, as might seem to be suggested by the function of the alien-I, or indeed by an ideal of clarity. In some circumstances, the more you know about a particular translator, the more individuality they manifest either textually or interpersonally, the more you may choose to trust them as mediators, in the same way as a prestigious actor gives identity and granularity to a performance without that particular visibility ever challenging the credibility of the acting as such.

2. Uncertainty risk: a lowest common denominator

Within the interpersonal frame, translation also has a certain specificity in that it operates on *texts*, be they spoken, written or audiovisual. And the level of the text, as a collection of linguistic tokens, invites a rather different way of thinking about risk.

In previous applications of risk analysis to the translation processes, risk has basically been treated as a correlative of uncertainty. For example, Künzli (2004) assumes that when translators are not sure of something in a text (that is, when they are guessing), they are taking risks. Not surprisingly, he concludes that students tend to take more risks than professionals, since they at least signal more uncertainty when they verbalize their decision-making. Professionals, on the other hand, interestingly tend to “mitigate potential risk by making the client a partner in the translation process” (2004:34). This happens when they add notes for the client or footnotes in the text, assuming an extra-translational voice, gaining credibility through enhanced visibility, and thus effectively transferring some of the risk onto the client. Similarly, Angelone

(2010:19) focuses on the translator's 'uncertainty management', defined as "the application of conscious, deliberate strategies for overcoming comprehension, transfer, or production indecision".

In these approaches, which seek to analyze translators' cognitive processes when translating, risk is generally seen as a result of uncertainty and thus as a correlative of text difficulty. Let me call this 'uncertainty risk', for want of a better term ('guesswork risk' might be a clearer alternative), specifying that here it is *internal* to the translator's decision-making processes.

Although I shall be drawing on some of the results of process research, this general kind of uncertainty risk is something I sense we have to move beyond. There are three possible problems with it: (1) as formulated and applied, it is not specific to translation, but is instead a feature of all acts of understanding and indeed of all risk (without uncertainty, there is no risk); (2) as such, it does not connect in any formal way with the risks that are socially structured externally to the translation process (although Künzli's comments about communications with clients start to show a way forward in this respect); and (3) most importantly, these approaches see risk as something that is exclusively negative, the enemy, the thing to be reduced for good communication to proceed. What is missing in these approaches, I suggest, is a concept of risk-taking as an active *positive* option, corresponding to possible enhanced social *rewards*.

Let us accept that there must be uncertainty in order for there to be risks, and that all decisions are partly based on guesswork. Yet that does not imply we have to turn all risk into the thing to be avoided, the thing that experienced translators perhaps know how to avoid. Surely there are also gains from risk-taking? Guessing, after all, is not quite the same thing as consciously formulating a neologism, or coming up with a proverb that says almost the same thing as the start-text proverb, or adapting a publicity slogan to a new cultural situation. Those kinds of creative translation practices deserve recognition as legitimate risk-taking. But are they rewarded with the corresponding gains?

To conceptualize risk in terms of *both* uncertainty and gain, you have to go back to the thing to be translated.

3. Communicative risk: texts used in contexts

When applied to communication, risk management is not just a matter of avoiding cliffs and rocks; it is a way of creating *benefits* by working together. Risk historically started to take on the sense of presenting opportunities much later than the classical metaphors from navigation, perhaps as "mysticism yielded to science and logic" (Bernstein, 1998:20) but more certainly with the rise of expansive capitalist cultures, as analyzed in Beck (1986), Luhmann (1991) and Giddens (e.g. 1999). These days there is no shortage of mathematical, psychological and sociological reflections on risk. For my present purposes, though, all that I really need is the idea that risk involves not just probable losses, but also the possibility of gain from communicative exchanges.

Let me tread carefully: the concept of 'benefits of communication' here concerns something more than the credibility by virtue of which it is cost-effective to trust translators; it potentially concerns all communicative exchanges. Further, the particular benefits I have in mind are not as specific as the profits that come from translation as a business (e.g. Stoeller, 2003), where the concepts of risk management are essentially those of any other commercial activity. I am interested here in the way texts are used in contexts.

3.1. Risk in a birth certificate

Here is a simple example (repeated in Pym, 2004/2005/2007). Imagine you are translating a birth certificate. It is a relatively humble document, with only a few significantly functional parts. Let us say you have the name of the person born, the date of birth, the names of the parents, the name of the midwife, and the name of the reporting officer. Now, if you are going to make a mistake in the transcription or translation of those elements, where could you make it? Linguistically, all those elements have much the same status: they are noun phrases, just numbers and names. All these elements could provoke the same degree of uncertainty. In most of the contexts where the certificate has to operate, however, a mistake in the name of the person born or the date of birth would be disastrous. A mistake in the name of the midwife or reporting officer, on the other hand, would tend not to stop the text from working as a successful translation. Although all the elements might look the same as parts of speech, although they might all involve the same uncertainty, they are by no means the same as potential functions. In those terms, some elements are high-risk (in this case the name of the person born and the date of birth), others are low-risk (the name of the midwife and reporting officer), and most other cases lie at various points in between. That is what I want to call 'communicative risk'.

The example is not entirely fictitious. Mayoral (2003) describes Pakistani birth certificates in which the name of the midwife ('Dai Bibi') is apparently mostly the same in all the certificates presented in Spain, as is the name of the hospital reporting officer ('Chawkidar'). The same woman would seem to have brought into the world a great many Pakistanis, and the same officer has reported all their births. A truly heroic feat! As it turns out, so I am told, the first textual element here is not a proper noun as such but the Urdu common noun phrase for 'midwife' or 'married woman'. The second element means something like 'conciierge', apparently. The issuing officers in Pakistan have not bothered to enter proper nouns for

these elements; translators (in this case in Spain) do not bother to indicate that the apparent names are not names at all; and the Spanish receiving authorities accept the operative fiction, in the interests of expediency. Or better, the issuing and receiving authorities, along with their various intermediaries, choose to give credibility to an operative fiction because it puts nothing at risk. Nothing is really upset by the fact that the one fictional woman and the one fictional reporter officially participated in thousands of births. And yet much would be upset, I hope, if several thousand Pakistanis all entered Spain with the same name and date of birth.

The moral of the story, again, is that texts, when operative in specific contexts, can have some elements that are high-risk, many that are low-risk, and most that are somewhere in between. Of course, a change in context may produce a new configuration of risk for the same text. If the birth certificate is presented in a translation exam, for instance, then the translator might take pains to ensure there are no errors anywhere. The distribution of risk is not fixed in the text (although it can certainly be pointed to discursively); it depends on the interaction with situational elements.

The other important point to make here is that risk is not the same thing as translative difficulty. In an ophthalmology report, for example, there are all kinds of opaque technical terms that the translator should seek to get right, but if the report is to be used in an insurance claim of some kind, the key item will be the one that diagnoses the possible *causes* of the condition. If the translator makes a mistake in that particular part of the text, all the correct technical terms will be to little avail.

3.2. *Again, risk of what?*

If you are aware that not all text elements involve the same degree of communicative risk, you might rationally choose to work hard on the high-risk elements, quickly on the low-risk elements, and apply a sliding scale for the things in between. When you do this, the kind of risk involved is no longer simply that of losing credibility. There is a distribution of risk even before the translator enters the scene, and that prior distribution remains much the same, independently of whether the text is to be the object of translation, reported speech, or indeed any form of further communication. So what is the nature of this more primary kind of communicative risk?

The model I want to use here posits that the general aim of translations, like all speech events, is to allow cooperation (initially as in [Grice, 1975](#)), understood as the attainment of benefits for all participants. In successful communication, everyone gets more out of it than they put into it. This kind of success is thus to be considered independently of the actual linguistic or ideological content dealt with; it is *not* specific to translation. Further, judgments about the relative value of such success and efforts are made subjectively by each participant when determining whether or not to engage in the speech event or to continue their engagement.

The kind of communicative risk I am considering at this level is thus actually the probability of non-cooperation, prior to any calculations of a translator's credibility. This kind of prior risk analysis is particularly useful when it says something about the situations in which translation should be used. In healthcare situations, the employment of a professional interpreter is more expensive (in terms of money and organizational time) than 'getting by' with non-professionals or imperfect language competencies, which is why one study found that "physicians made decisions about interpreter use by weighing the perceived value of communication in clinical decision making against their own time constraints" ([Diamond et al., 2009:258](#)). That is, professional interpreters were used only in situations that were deemed to involve high-risk values and high costs for alternatives to translation. The unequal distribution of communicative risk across texts and situations is thus able to speak to not only how much effort a translator should invest in parts of a text, but also whether or not professional mediation is required at all.

4. A question of effort and strategy

There are at least three things translators can do with risk: avoid it (as the previous analysts of uncertainty risk seem to want us to do), transfer it (as Künzli intimates when he shows how clients can be incorporated into the translation process), or assume it (as I want to suggest now). Translators should be prepared to take risks, and reap the consequences. However, this is not simply a matter of urging translators to be more 'courageous' in their decisions (as in [Nord, 2014](#)). Risk involves rather more than just guessing (risk-taking based on ignorance), consulting with your client (basic risk transfer) or being creative (risk-taking as a deliberate gain-seeking act). It also means investing *effort* in those various options. Risk 'management' concerns not just solutions, but also work.

4.1. *A model of risks and efforts*

My starting position here is that all possible uncertainty and communicative risks can be reduced by hard work. Had we infinite world and time, perfect understandings would theoretically be possible across all languages. Yet our mortal lives

are limited; absolute certainty is never reached (even the official glossaries may have changed in the last five minutes). So the question is not whether it is possible to eliminate all risk (it is not), but how to distribute effort in a way that corresponds to the various communicative risks involved (while at the same time dealing with uncertainty and maintaining credibility – but here my concern is specifically with communicative risk). Basically, these are the simple lessons that can be taught in most introductory classes: ‘Don’t work too hard!’ (since beginners tend to work too much on all kinds of minor details) and ‘Work hard when it matters!’ (which is the part that some of my students tend to forget).

Pursuing this logic, the actions performed by translators can be considered in terms of the following square:

	Low chance of non-cooperation	High chance of non-cooperation
Low effort	Low-risk (risk aversion, risk transfer)	Mid-risk (‘under-work’, guesswork)
High effort	Mid-risk (overwork, inefficient labor)	High-risk (risk transfer, risk taking)

The estimations of high and low effort, and of high and low risk, are in this case made subjectively by the translator in the moment of translating. The decisions resulting from those estimations can be more or less happy, and can relate to risk management in various ways.

The square enables us to recognize but criticize two kinds of behavior: the guesswork of beginners (or translators with inadequate knowledge resources and/or strategic skills) and the overwork of beginners and insecure translators who feel they need more information on everything. That is, trainers can bemoan both a quick rush to decision and an excessive dependence on information-gathering.

The risk-management strategies of more substantial interest are in the two shaded cells.

In the ‘low-risk’ shaded cell, if you invest low effort in a problem with a low probability of non-cooperation, you have no reason to be taking risks. It is logical here to act in a risk-averse way, by using omission, explicitation, simplification, generalization, attenuation, or more simply to reduce effort by adopting a literalist approach. It would not be logical here to consult the client (a more elaborate form of risk transfer than is literalism), since the problem to be solved is relatively unimportant.

In the ‘high-risk’ shaded cell, if you invest high effort in a problem with high uncertainties, you are probably acting rationally, but what are you actually doing with communicative risk? In principle, the information gathered is always inadequate; your decision will always be under-determined; uncertainty will not disappear, but you have to make a decision sooner or later. Here consultation with the client becomes a logical use of risk transfer. Note, though, that the actual consultation is in effect another act of communication, with its own attendant risks: the risk transfer itself comes in the moment the translator decides to *accept* what the client says.

This ‘high risk’ shaded cell is the logical place to find justified risk-taking. You are still going to be guessing to some extent, since there is no complete information, but hopefully you have gathered enough information to make an *educated* guess, and you have reasons to think that it is worthwhile to do so. One of the theoretical problems in the area of this second shaded cell is that the information can keep growing, in a way that is quite justified by the degree of risk at stake, so the resulting complexity makes it progressively harder to set on a clear decision. Under such high-pressure situations, where some resolution is necessary, the actual decision could be of any kind, from literalism to extreme invention to omission. In principle, there is no set of ideal solution types for such high-risk decisions: there is a certain randomness, or trial-and-error, as in the high-level decisions of advertising agencies, where creativity intervenes *after* all the calculations have been made. Here we might also borrow an example from [Levý \(1967\)](#): the title of Brecht’s play *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* literally refers to a female character who pretends to be a man, so the title could refer to The Good Woman, The Good Man, The Good Person, The Good Soul, and possibly more. There is no one correct solution, but the more *incorrect* solutions would probably be those that try to play it too safe, perhaps by spelling out the plot: The Good Woman who Pretends to be a Bad Man. . . not a real crowd-pleaser.

This kind of analysis reveals an intriguing ambivalence associated with literalism (understood as translating as close to the start text as possible). In the ‘low risk’ area of business, literalism plays a logical role as an effort-reducing measure: high effort is not warranted, so the translator just works as quickly and as simply as possible, in a general frame of mind that [Jensen \(2000\)](#), working from [Bereiter and Scardamalia](#), characterizes as ‘knowledge telling’ (rather than ‘knowledge transforming’). However, when it appears in the ‘high risk’ area, literalism can more readily be interpreted as an instance of risk aversion: in a situation of unresolved doubts, the translator simply puts what is there in the text – ‘Don’t blame me, it’s the fault of the author!’

4.2. A model of translative actions

I will now attempt to make this evolving model a little more sophisticated. Clearly, not everything that translators do constitutes the same kind of effort. Something further is required.

A distinction can be made between information-gathering (the investment of cognitive resources in the recognition of a problem) and decision-making (the actual decisions about what to put in the translation – the tentative or last proposed solution to the problem). Risk management concerns both aspects, but in different ways according to the order of activities. Imagine some basic sequences of information-gathering (I) and decision-making (D) (here I simplify things by not including all the possible decisions to gather more information):

Quick solution of low-risk problem: I, D
 Need for documentation: I, I, D
 Revision: I, D, D
 Revision after more information: I, D, I, D
 And so on.

These strings are rather like the ‘strategies’ formulated by [Lörscher \(1991\)](#) near the beginning of translation process research. My purpose here, though, is not just to describe the sequences of specific kinds of actions. There is also a principle at stake: in each of these actions, the translator’s aim could be to reach a justified D with a minimum of I. This, of course, looks rather like Levý’s 1969 application of von Neumann’s ‘minimax’ theorem to translation, assuming that the aim is to invest minimum effort to obtain maximum effect. Here, however, I make no assumption that the decisions are made in an environment of complete information (which was Levý’s assumption). Quite the opposite, in fact: for risk management, it is more important to consider *degrees* of information-gathering (from low-effort to high-effort) and the degrees of *uncertainty* associated with decision-making.

If this were all, we would assume that the more uncertainty is involved in a decision, the more information is required. The plays of I and D can indeed be seen operating on this level. However, if we are to see translating as substantial risk management, the uncertainty of D is not really the thing that most concerns us (that is mere uncertainty risk). More depends, I propose, on the risks at stake when D is positioned within a specific communicative context (hence communicative risk). This is why risk management is not just about the uncertainty of decisions. The more important risk is what is likely to happen when a certain decision is not optimal.

4.3. Simple risk strategies in complex decision-making

The above paragraphs have started to indicate ways in which more subtle models of the translation process could be built on the principles of risk management, purporting to explain the decisions made by both the translator and the other participants in the speech event. The underlying supposition is that the decisions are in some way rational, able to be explained in terms of shared logics, and related to variable efforts. At the same time, however, translative decisions can be characterized by the relatively weak encoding of shared frames, not only of linguistic elements but also of the ways in which the various actors evaluate each other’s credibility. Intercultural spaces, which is where I assume translative cognitive processes take place, invite heightened doubt and more intense questioning of the other; they are by nature given to challenged credibility and thus to greater risk. This lends the decision processes a degree of complexity that, while not undoing the underlying appeals to rationality, has given rise to theorizing in terms of fuzzy logic (e.g. [Monacelli and Punzo, 2001](#)), pre-industrial ‘wisdom’ ([Marais, 2013](#)) and complexity theory (e.g. [Longa, 2004](#)), along with increasing references to theories of heuristics, cybernetics, emergence, and chaos, to name but a few (see [Pym, 2009/2014:102–104](#)). There is a veritable avalanche of possible non-linear models out there, and something as guileless as a four-cell square, like the one above, is not going to remain simple for very long.

In most interesting problems there is not just one reason or kind of certainty at stake: there are arguments and counter-arguments, different kinds of goals (the notion of a unitary *Skopos* is mostly an illusion) and there are layered communicative situations. This does not mean, however, that rational logics of risk management no longer apply: economic models provide sophisticated mathematics of hedging and trade-offs, incorporating as many cultural factors as you like, including the view of translating as a norm-governed activity (the translator operates in terms of what the receiving locale expects a translation to be like). One of those complexities concerns variable attitudes to risk itself: a facile generalization is that different cultures have different degrees of risk-tolerance (labeled ‘uncertainty avoidance’ in [Hofstede, 2001](#)) and there are also many differences within cultures and between professions; we know that expert translators tend to make holistic decisions based on the intuitions that come from experience; and we know that experience is never gathered in a cultural vacuum.

Even when problems are complex, there are nevertheless some commonplace decision-making strategies that operate on the basis of hedging one's bets. For example, here is one of my students reporting post hoc on how she solved a fairly frequent problem when translating from Spanish:

[...] the author references the *sistema anglosajón* [Anglo-Saxon system]. This phrasing was a bit difficult to render in the beginning because I was not sure if the author was only referencing the UK and Irish systems, the US system, or the education systems of English-speaking countries in general. I did not want to use the term 'Anglo-Saxon' because I feel that the term is antiquated and refers to the Anglo-Saxons of the 5th century. I also did not want to use the term 'English-speaking countries' because there are over 50 countries with English as an official language and I cannot imagine that they all have a similar university system. In the end, [...] I decided that 'US and UK systems' was the best compromise and probably best describes the author's knowledge of university systems in the English-speaking world.

The strategy here is to identify three possible renditions, exclude two as being too high-risk, and to go with the low-risk solution, since this is a low-risk situation. Note that the decision-making is overtly subjective and intuitive ('I was not sure', 'I did not want', 'I feel', 'I cannot imagine that...') and is based not on linguistic analysis but on a cultural assessment of the author's presumed knowledge. Indeed, here we have the translator assessing the author's credibility.

For a second example, similarly geographical, I draw on Matsushita's (2014) analysis of the way a speech by Barack Obama was rendered in the Japanese press:

ST: We will support democracy from Asia to Africa, from the Americas to the Middle East

TT1: アジアからアフリカまで民主主義を支援する

[... support democracy from Asia to Africa]

TT2: アジア、アフリカ、中南米、中東で民主主義を支援する

[... support democracy in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East]

Why should the first translation omit the reference to 'the Americas'? Matsushita suggests that the literal rendition *Beishu* (米州) is too uncommon a word in Japanese, perhaps risking comprehension difficulties in a low-risk context. That could be one reason for its omission. A further reason can be deduced from the second translation, where "the Americas" is specified as *Chunanbei* (中南米, 'Latin America'), presumably because the rest of 'the Americas' (Canada and the United States itself) do not require support for their democracies. Both translations effectively remove a technical complication embedded in the English text, deploying otherwise aberrant low-effort solutions to solve a low-risk problem.

A third example is similar but less innocent. In its first Hebrew translation of the 2003 'Roadmap for Peace in the Middle East', the newspaper *Yediot Aharonot* omitted a sentence referring to "future actions on settlements". This was possibly to reduce the communicative risk of upsetting those of its readers who wanted to retain the illegal settlements. At the same time, though, the omission incurred significant credibility risk, since anyone could compare the various translations available, note the absence, then question the motivations behind the skipping of what was clearly a high-risk text element. The decision can thus be understood as an attempted trade-off between the potential benefits of those two alternative risks, which are in fact modes of engagement with two potential kinds of readerships: the translator (and/or editor) seems to have bet that the readership included more 'pro-settlement' enthusiasts than readers of variant translations (for a fuller analysis, see Ayyad and Pym, 2012).

Examples like these illustrate the complex ways in which translators can seek to manage risk, distributing efforts along paths that are rarely described in the textbooks. The model of risks and efforts should nevertheless be tested on more substantial data from studies of translations.

5. Evidence for the model

Actual translators can be less than ideal rationalists. So do they really distribute effort in terms of risk? And if so, what kinds of strategies do they employ?

Various kinds of evidence can be mustered in support of the model, although none of it would seem definitive.

5.1. Evidence from comparative product studies

Anecdotal evidence suggests that our basic principle might hold: translators work less on low-risk elements (as in the examples above) and harder on high-risk elements. When I proposed these principles to a group of some 120 Bible translation consultants at a workshop of the United Bible Societies in 2003, the working groups reported back that, yes, they did tend to find minor errors of attention in the parts of the Bible that virtually no one reads (for instance, in the strings

of genealogies of the kind “X begat Y”), whereas there were no major slips of translative attention in key passages such as the claims of virgin birth (divergent theological interpretations, of course, but nothing that might look like shoddy guesswork).

Further evidence for risk-based effort distribution can be found in Gile’s (1999) experiment where conference interpreters were asked to render the same short text twice, under conditions where they were assumed to have greater processing capacity available during the second rendition. My interpretation of the data (Pym, 2008) suggests that the interpreters invested greater discursive effort in the high-risk items in their second rendition, resulting in more elaborate syntax and fewer omissions with respect to those items.

5.2. Evidence from comparisons of novices and professionals

Another kind of evidence for large-scale risk management can be gleaned indirectly from studies that compare the cognitive processes of novices with those of professionals. An initial assumption among researchers was that the professionals, after years of experience, would use more automatized routines, quickly and without high levels of conscious attention (as when we ride a bike or drive a car), and this would explain why they translate faster. The actual studies, however, tend to show that the more experienced translators not only have more automatization but also make clearer shifts between routine tasks and conscious problem-solving (see Krings, 1988; Jääskeläinen and Tirkkonen-Condit, 1991; Englund Dimitrova, 2005). That is, they have a more *uneven* effort distribution, which might correspond to an unequal distribution of effort between high-risk and low-risk text elements.

This need not mean that high-risk elements require more linguistic transformations. As mentioned above, Künzli (2004) found that experienced translators were more likely to use risk-transfer strategies such as conscious literalism (reproducing start-text ambiguity at key points) or notes to clients (signaling a problematic ambiguity), whereas novices tried to resolve ambiguities by guesswork, investing effort in linguistic transformations that were not strictly necessary. The message here is that ‘effort’ should not be reduced to actual interventions in the text: a great deal of *thought* can go into the use of simple literalism as a strategy.

5.3. Evidence from ‘tendencies’ in translated language

Some of the most highly researched and synthesized hypotheses on translation processes concern what Levý (1963/2011) called translator’s ‘tendencies’, also known as ‘universals’ in the Tel Aviv School of the late 1980s and 1990s, then tentatively distilled into proposed ‘laws of translational behavior’ by Toury (1995/2012). As historically formulated, these tendencies predict that translations differ from non-translations (be they start texts or parallel texts in the target language) in that they display more of certain linguistic features. The proposed tendencies include: (1) *Simplification*: “the process and/or result of making do with less [different] words” in translations as opposed to their start texts (Blum-Kulka and Levenston, 1983); (2) *Explicitation*: information that is implicit in the start text tends to become more explicit in the target text (Blum-Kulka, 1986/2000); (3) *Equalizing*: translations tend to eschew extremes of language use, such as highly marked informality or formality (Shlesinger, 1989); (4) *Unique items*: linguistic features that are found in the target language but not in the start language (for example, certain Finnish clitics have no easy counterparts in other European languages) tend to be used less frequently in translations than in non-translations in the target language (translations into Finnish tend to have fewer such clitics than do parallel texts authored in Finnish) (Tirkkonen-Condit, 2004). There is now an extensive bibliography on such proposed tendencies, with experimental evidence in many language pairs, particularly for explicitation.

Those studies are nevertheless based on no more than the comparison of *texts*, often in corpora, so their findings then have to be interpreted in terms of the actual cognitive processes involved. Even so, it could be that all four of the above tendencies indicate behavior that is particularly *risk-averse*. The translator presumably simplifies so as to make comprehension easier; explicitation similarly reduces the risk of end-user misunderstanding – Blum-Kulka (1986/2000:309) talks of the translator having to “foresee the possibilities of ‘damage’ to interpretation” –; the avoidance of discursive extremes (‘equalizing’) gives a bland, flat language that has long been recognized as a frequent feature of translations; and the avoidance of unique items suggests that the translator is also playing it safe by following the indications of the start text rather than exploiting the full resources of the target language. To be sure, not all these tendencies are univocal: when translators explicitate, for example, they have to be very sure that the values they spell out really are implicit in the start text, and that move in itself indicates a type of risk taking (as noted in Shlesinger, 1989:154–156; Pym, 2007). In general, though, all these tendencies point toward risk-aversion.

Toury’s two proposed laws appear to be singing much the same tune. According to the ‘law of increasing standardization’ (Toury, 1995:267ff.), translational language is less varied and less specific than non-translational language, which would fit in with the above tendencies. And the ‘law of interference’ (Toury, 1995:274ff.), which posits that

translators make changes at the lower linguistic levels (sentence, phrase, term) rather than the larger units (paragraph, etc.), is similarly compatible with a strategy of playing it safe. Small units are for translators; large units are for authors, since they involve greater risks, or so we might surmise.

The evidence thus suggests that translators not only distribute effort in accordance with risk, but also that they may be particularly risk-averse as a professional group. This is a worrying possibility, as perturbing as the bland bureaucratic language that comes from multilingual organizations that not only communicate through translations but also write anodyne texts shaped in order to be translated.

On the other hand, this bleak prospect might also be due to the kinds of translations that have been looked at in the experiments and fed into the corpora. If we considered advertising, fansubbing, or other genres where risk concerns as much the *form* of expression as the content, would the findings be different?

5.4. Evidence from think-aloud protocols

Another kind of research looks more closely at the way individual translators make decisions in very specific situations. Studies using think-aloud protocols (the early work is summarized, for example, in [Bernadini, 2001](#)) tend to suggest that translators *combine* different kinds of risk management, mixing and matching them on various linguistic levels. Analyzing extensive think-aloud data, [Hui \(2012\)](#) finds various mixes of risk-aversion, risk-transfer and risk-taking, with the one translator sometimes giving different (and thus initially contradictory) reasons for similar translation decisions. By tracking the numbers and types of solutions that each translator considers, rejects and accepts, Hui is able to draw up quite subtle 'risk profiles' of individual translators (we will see an example below).

In sum, these various kinds of evidence come via different research instruments, in most cases from projects that were focused on aspects other than risk. None of the evidence should be considered a definitive justification of the risk-management model. Yet most of it, I suggest, can be seen as stimulating possible avenues for research in terms of our model.

6. Evidence for benefits and trade offs

I have noted that around the sixteenth century the concept of risk gained a more positive sense as something presenting opportunity and thus possible gain: people who take chances, running risks, can hope to achieve increased benefits as a possible result. A key moment in this history is [Pascal's](#) argument that it is rational to bet on the existence of God: since the possible rewards are infinite, finite investment can bring immeasurable gain (*Pensées* §233). Perhaps we should then not be surprised to find the huge human effort invested down the centuries in the translation and exegesis of texts promising divine salvation.

On the terrestrial side of infinite values, however, the gains ensuing from translational action can be estimated in terms of communicative cooperation: when all participants get more out of the interaction than they put into it, and when they trust the mediator, a portion of the gains are then logically a reward for the mediator (this enters into the calculations of transaction costs, see [Pym, 1995](#)). That much can be argued more or less in terms of simple economics. The difficulty nevertheless comes when you attempt to conceptualize the collective gain in terms of just one purpose, function or *Skopos*. There is very rarely just one purpose at stake, since different users have different aims and the one text can be put to several different uses. Faced with such situations, risk analysis is able to replace essentialist functionalism (the belief that an action or a text has just one function) with a logic of trade-offs.

Examples of this can be found in [Hui \(2012\)](#), which concerns translations of a marketing text. Not only was the nature of the text very purpose-oriented, but the translators were themselves competing for gain: Hui had groups of final-year Masters students translate the same text and then present it to prospective clients (in a simulation exercise) in order to win a hypothetical long-term contract. In this situation, the success conditions clearly concerned more than sticking to the start text.

To take just one example, when a student translator is trying to invent a Chinese slogan for the American company, the following logics can all be found in his think-aloud protocol: (1) literalism will produce nonsense, and so would be too risky; (2) a linguistically adapted version close to the American slogan will sound strange in Chinese but will probably keep the client happy (communicative risk transfer); (3) a new slogan in Chinese might keep end-users happy but would have to be explained to the client (communicative risk taking), involving further effort; and (4) if the translator can explain all these things to the client, then that translator will be noticed and might thereby win the contract (credibility risk taking). If the translator can be at least intuitively aware of all these arguments, the final decision to go with strategy 3 (a new slogan) did not mean he (yes, a man) was just taking that specific risk: he would appear to have invested cognitive effort in arguments 2, 3 and 4; he had determined that argument 3 had more weight than argument 2; and he had reasoned that those three arguments were ultimately compatible in the given situation. We can thus see the final option as a trade-off, a value selected because it satisfies the probabilities of several otherwise separate purposes.

This kind of analysis starts to show how the logics of compromise and trade-off can move us away from large-scale generalizations about the mindsets of translators; they can bring together our three kinds of risk. It also introduces us to the kind of complex, holistic decision-making processes that generally characterize expertise, in translation as elsewhere.

7. Conclusion: the ruse of trust and how to reward risk-taking

Risk analysis can explain many performative aspects of translation in a reasonably novel and coherent way. Yet it is not, or is not meant to be, a neutral description. In including from the outset a category for communicative risk-taking, in insisting on the pertinence of *gains* as well as losses, I hope to have created space for a reasoned critique of several current translation practices.

I have put forward a few simple propositions:

1. Translation is a communicative act in which, with respect to its specificity as a translation, the greatest risk is of losing of the translator's credibility.
2. Texts have some elements that have high communicative risk and some that have low communicative risk in specific contexts.
3. Experienced translators rationally invest greater effort in the high-risk elements.

Presented in this way, there is a logical conflict between these propositions, since the type of credibility risk at work in proposition 1 is not the same as the communicative risk referred to in the other two propositions. This conflict can be explained by what we might call the ruse of trust, which potentially upsets the rationality of investing high effort in high-risk items across the board.

The ruse is worth spelling out in slightly more social terms. Translation can be characterized in terms of situations where there are relatively few shared cultural referents between participants, and thus greater risks of misunderstandings, betrayals, and thus non-cooperation. This implies there is always some degree of residual or potential mistrust, which in turn means that any low-effort mediation can be seized upon as marking a lack of credibility. Nothing is easier than to find just one mistake in a translation and declare the whole enterprise unreliable – this is precisely what happened in the story recounted above, where the one clear deviation ('million' instead of 'thousand') was not key for the purpose of the text, could undoubtedly be rectified in the mind of any moderately intelligent reader, and yet led to a loss of trust, hence non-cooperation. For the translator's professional relationships, *any* mistake is potentially a challenge to credibility, even when it would not be so in non-translational circumstances. And this can override the rational distribution of effort in accordance with variable communicative risk. Of course, the ruse can also work the other way: few things invite more disaster than to hear a good upper-class accent and believe, wrongly, that the interpreter is therefore an expert in field knowledge as well.

This could be why the various snippets of evidence generally point in the same general direction: translators tend to be risk-averse; they tend not to do anything to compromise their credibility; they tend to invest more effort in the low-risk items than they otherwise should, and they tend not to offer spectacular, out-of-the-ordinary solutions for the high-risk items. Further, even when confronted with evidence that they distribute effort in an uneven way, few translators confess to this openly. After all, to admit to skimming or inventing would simply create a heightened risk of losing credibility. The result, as I have said, may be that a culture that relies on translations tends to produce and consume quite anodyne texts, unable to surprise or inspire, and the same bland qualities tend to infiltrate even the start texts that are written in order to be translated. The bureaucracy of the European Commission might be an example of a translation culture based on risk aversion.

Need this be so? Not necessarily. The logic by which one mistake condemns a whole translation should perhaps only apply in situations where translators are facing high credibility risks. In other situations, where credibility is stable and translators are more trusted, the principle of risk-based effort distribution might still apply. The difference between these two situations was observed by Leonardo Bruni in 1405, when he complained that authors always get the praise for what is good in a translation, and translators merely receive the blame for what is wrong, even when the faults are in the start text (Bruni 1405/1928:102–103).³ With that kind of reward structure, which has been part of Western discursive formations since the Renaissance, translators logically try to cover all bets and avoid the fireworks. However, with another kind of reward structure (like that operative in the localization of advertising, for instance, or fan-subbing, or indeed Bruni's humanistic creation of his own strong identity as a credible translator), we would not expect to find such risk aversion. So it could be a question of knowing how properly to reward translators for taking risks.

That, at least, is a hypothesis worth testing.

³ "Quis enim has conversiones legit, qui non omnia praeclare dicta primi auctoris putet, omnia vero absurda conversoris vitio facta esse arbitretur? [...] Atque ita fit, ut laus quidem omnis primi auctoris sit, reprehensio vero conversoris, ut admirandum videatur, in tam iniqua conditione rerum velle quemquam sanae mentis ad transferendum accedere." (Bruni, 1405/1969:102, 103)

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