
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Translation Profession Between the Ethical Challenges and Social Responsibilities

Rabia Zouaghi¹ ✉ and Aafrae Garmate²

¹Ph.D Candidate, Comparative Literature Department, Binghamton University, NY

²Lecturer of English language, Department of English Language, Jazan Univeristy, K.S.A

Corresponding Author: Rabia Zouaghi, **E-mail:** rzouagh1@bingamton.edu

ABSTRACT

Language transfer is an important and complicated process that requires a critical communication component, which is translation. As a language mediator, translation is subject to ethical and social responsibilities. The translator is responsible for transferring the source text in a multilingual setting, and accountability became a vital issue in the translation and interpreting fields. Baker & Maier (2011) claim that there is an increase in responsibility. Thus, this has yielded an increase in visibility, hence greater pressure on the profession to demonstrate that it is cognizant of its impact on society (3). In many situations, a translator faces challenging and complicated tasks; Robinson (1997) raised the following questions from a translator's point of view; what can a translator do when he/she is asked to translate an offensive text? Or, to put it differently, what can a feminist translator do when she is asked to translate a blatantly sexist text? And what can be done in the case of a liberal translator when he/she is asked to translate a neo-Nazi text? (26). These previous examples carry aspects that may create a clash between professional ethics, loyalty to the person, company, or agency paying the translator, and sometimes the translator's personal and moral beliefs. In the present paper, I aim to expand my understanding of ethics and social responsibilities in the translation field. Moreover, I seek to analyze various challenges that may face the translator/interpreter while producing a target text that fits into the new cultural setting of the target language, serves its purpose, and considers professional ethics.

KEYWORDS

Translation, interpreting, ethics, social responsibility

ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 05 January 2025

PUBLISHED: 17 January 2025

DOI: 10.32996/ijllt.2025.8.1.13

1. Introduction

Like any other profession, translation possesses ethics that govern the profession by following and respecting a list of ethics that includes conveying the meaning between people and cultures faithfully, accurately, and impartially. The American Translators Association of Ethics and Professional Practice argues that a translator is subject to linguistic integrity implies that nothing is added or omitted in the target language and must maintain mantle neutrality and hold in confidence any privileged entrusted information during any translation and interpreting task. Robinson (2003) defines translation ethics as a practice of keeping the meaning of source text undistorted (25). According to Baker & Maier (2011), a translation could be viewed as an ethical activity. This a topic that concerns and has become a broadly contextual question since translators and interpreters serve as the only gateway between those who speak different languages and those working in stressful and delicate situations; therefore, a set of rules and guidelines were created to secure and guarantee a high level of professionalism to serve and meet the expectations of the involved participants and society at large. Along with ethical responsibility, translators and interpreters confront board issues of social responsibilities that arise often and unexpectedly while performing their daily translation and interpreting tasks.

In many situations, it has been witnessed that translators/interpreters may deviate from the faithful rendering of a source text. An act that was taken seriously and investigated to determine the translators' rights in terms of applying changes in the source text and questioning whether it is always ethical to change or adapt in the translation of the source text. Furthermore, the translation task is an action that is framed in a different context, ideological, and political spheres that may affect it. Therefore, such an important task may jeopardize the lives of the people they serve. *Baker & Maier* (2011) stated; "The decisions made during the course of translating and interpreting can potentially have a considerable impact on the survival of individuals and even whole communities; at the very least they can impact the quality of life of those who rely on the translator or interpreter to mediate for them, whether in business meetings or healthcare encounters, in the daily interaction between host country officials and vulnerable migrants, or in preparing instructions for the use of a food mixer" (4).

2. Concept of Ethics and Morality

Generally speaking, ethics and morality refer to our ability to make decisions based on what is believed to be morally the right thing to do in a specific situation or context. However, knowing what to do is not always a great option when it comes to translation and interpreting tasks. Many translators find themselves unsure and challenged in using what they know and in what ways they should perform that knowledge. According to *Baker & Maier* (2001), translators should be concerned with the question "What kind of translator should be" instead of focusing on the question "What kind of person should I be". *Baker* (2001) assumed that 'ethics is about the stream of life rather than just its turbulent moments'. For her, the default choices taken by translators can have ethical implications.

3. Types of Ethics

3.1. The Cultural and Ideological Factors

3.1.1 Power

In some situations, the translator/interpreter finds him/her self-powerless and asks to change, adapt, or distort the meaning of the source text in a specific way that satisfies and meets the expectations of the user's needs. In such situations, translators are required to translate text that they find abhorrent. *Robinson* (1997) claims that translators are human beings, and they have opinions, attitudes, beliefs, and feelings and they want to be proud of what they do (40). Such a clash between their personal ethics and external professional ethics may result in making dramatic decisions. As an example, the Canadian feminist translator *Susanne Lobtiniere Hardwood* (1991) declared that she no longer translates works by men: the pressure is too great to adopt a male voice, and she refuses to coopt with it (*Robinson* 1997-40). Similarly, a British translator living in Brazil was called for an ongoing task to translate everything being published in the era of smoking from Portuguese into English. She is known to be against smoking and considered to be an opponent of the tobacco industry; she accepted the task and started the translation. Within time, she started to pay close attention that her commission was coming from the world's biggest tobacco company. A company that is held accountable in her eyes for the destruction of thousands of acres of Amazon rainforest. Gradually, she started to feel disturbed, and her ethical doubts changed to a distaste for her assignment. A week later, she received a new assignment, which was translating a booklet by the anti-tobacco group. Suddenly, she realizes that she has to share this booklet translation assignment paid for by the tobacco company with this group fighting for her source of income. As a result, she set up an immediate meeting with the anti-tobacco group while she was worried about her action's outcomes and legal issues. After reassuring them that she would not be at legal risk, she handed them the translated booklet. However, she never received any new assignments from the group, nor did she face any legal actions.

3.1.2. Gender

In recent decades, women have taken an important role in society, especially after women's movements calling for more rights starting from the 19th century; along with that, gender issues were getting involved in language issues as well. *Von Flotow* (1997) stated that "by the passage of time, and through the achievements formed by feminists and their movements, women could express themselves and their abilities in society, and in fact, they could establish their identities in the world; just as *Simon* says: "feminism has also reordered lines of cultural transmission" (84). Utilizing translation, translators _often females_ have created new ways of exchange; besides, they have opened new translation markets, according to *Simon* (1996)," In addition to the conceptual challenging of translation tropes, feminism has worked to establish new intellectual connections." (1). According to *Simon* (1996), "translation helps women to express themselves through their writings and translations; for long, women have been limited to just translate, and they have been only permitted to enter this specific secondary zone of writing (39). In the field of translation, female translators have created new ways of exchange and helped in opening new translation markets. Furthermore, new strategies have been adopted in the feminist translation agenda, *Massardier-Kenney* (1997) suggests two types of strategies; author –centered and translator-centered, and both of them aim to make readers appreciate the source text (59). Her author-centered approach is based on commentary that emphasizes the importance of women and translated text and enhances the visibility of the translator. By doing that, translators will be able to express their motives for choosing the text. In

her second type, translator-centered strategy, the translator should make the translation visible through linguistic means that foreignize the target text.

4. Minority and Cultural Identity

The translation practice goes beyond the mere linguistic exercise, it is rooted deeply in the social and cultural communities. Since the translation activity is situated socially and culturally, it operates within a specific text political, historical, and cultural framework that bridges the different linguistic communities. Selecting a general natural or cultural agenda, where that text becomes a symbol of self-assertion or a tool for fostering cultural identity. During the translation process, translators tend to be neutral moderators. They depend on imbued strategies as they navigate tensions between faithful reproduction of the source text and asserting the distinctiveness of a particular culture as needed. *Venuti* (2008) claims that the translator must indicate the otherness of source text and source culture in translation. The translator will do his/her possible to maintain a separate identity within the target language and culture (16). *Venuti* suggests any translation should bear prefaces that announce the translator's strategy and translators must force a revision of codes- cultural, economic, and legal marginalize and exploit them (311). He added, "... translating in any cultural and political location can be majoritarian, a rewriting of the foreign text to support dominant values in the translating culture" (1998, 139).

5. Translation Norms and Ethics

Translation norms are very important tools that can benefit any translator. *Hermans* (2009) claims that social norms are set to achieve society's expectations and respect their values and traditions (95). On the other hand, norms are psychological in the way of shared expectations regarding the individual's behaviors and the decisions they must take in specific situations, according to *Hermans*. *Nord* (1997) claims that there is a mutual impact on both, the translator and the audience by presenting a theoretical foundation of norms. An argument that was supported by *Hermans*, both of them believe that these forms can be viewed or used as a problem-solving tool that may assist the translator in completing his/her task within social and cultural criteria. (96). Additionally, *Pym* (1992) claims that the translator should play an important role, which is securing cooperation between all involved parties since the translation process can be viewed as a cross-cultural transaction, as cited in *Alwazna* (2014).

6. Professional Ethics and Personal Ethics

Professional ethics and personal ethics are important current topics that aim to investigate the borderline between them and ask questions such as, what a translator is supposed to do when loyalties to the author and reader clash. *Chesterman* (2001) stated "I suggest that understanding is the highest value for translators – albeit in a wide and varied sense. All other relevant professional values – truth, clarity, loyalty, trust – are subordinate to understanding. This, I submit, is the defining limit of a translator's professional ethics, and also of their professional responsibility, the responsibility of their practice. The translator might of course feel personally responsible for the consequences of this understanding, and this feeling of personal responsibility might well affect their decisions about whether, or how, to translate [...] What communicating parties do with their resultant understanding is a matter of their own ethical principles – whether they use it to cooperate, for good or evil, or whatever" (152). In other words, there is a distinction between professional and personal ethics. He provided four types of models of translation ethics; a representation ethic, a service ethic, an ethic of communication, and lastly, a norm-based ethic. (139-140). The first model is based on loyalty to the source text and loyalty towards the ethical representation of the Other. The second model is based on serving the client, and using it will allow achieving an ideal professional service. An ethic of communication is based on enabling communication and cooperation. The third model, norm-based ethics, is premised on the thought that norms encode the ethical values held at a specific time in a specific location. *Chesterman* (2001) believes that these models are problematic and may differ from each other because they carry different values and are based on different ethics.

Furthermore, *Pym* (2000) supports *Chesterman's* argument and believes that the translator's professional responsibility is limited and there is no need for him/her to claim any commitment to the content of their translated texts cited in *Alwazna* (2014).

The 2005 trial of Mohamed Yousry exemplifies the ethical dilemmas and legal precariousness encountered by translators and interpreters.

A university professor and professional Arabic interpreter Yousry, was engaged to aid in the defense of Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman, a blind Egyptian imam (Islamic scholar) charged with terrorist activity. His role involved translating sensitive materials, including letters between the cleric and his supporters, under the explicit instructions of defense attorneys.

The storm began when Yousry faced allegations that by translating a letter, which the prosecutors claimed aided Abdel Rahman in normal contact with his supporters, he was in breach of the terrorist communication prohibition measures (SAMS) set by the US. So, according to Yousry, he was just doing his job and acting as an interpreter only, with the supervision of a lawyer.

Regardless of his statements, Yousry was found guilty of aiding terrorism and of conspiracy to defraud the United States. The case sparked a broad discussion on the ethical and legal obligations of translators and interpreters. It brought to the fore the awkward situation in which translators find themselves when their professional obligations cross the borders of sensitive and highly charged political or legal issues and contexts. (Baker, 2011).

The trial underscored several key challenges for translators and interpreters:

- 6.1. **Role Clarity and Boundaries:** Translators frequently serve as neutral conduits of communication, but Yousry's case illustrated how their actions can be misconstrued as advocacy or complicity in the content they convey.
- 6.1.2. **Ethical Dilemmas:** Translators have to adhere to principles of impartiality and accuracy, but they may face moral conflicts when dealing with sensitive or potentially incriminating material.
- 6.1.3. **Legal Vulnerability:** The case demonstrated how translators and interpreters can be held legally accountable for the content they translate, and interpret, even when acting under the guidance and direction of others involved in the whole process.

Yousry's trial outcome raised issues concerning the translation and interpreting industry in general. The translator world should have such fundamental ethical principles together with legal structures that prevent their practice from being rendered unethical and help translators and interpreters navigate complex situations. Plus, it posed issues related to the function of the legal systems as such the varying degrees of the translator's active role aspects of high context situations.

For professionals in the field, the Yousry case serves as a warning emphasizing the importance of awareness, openness, and a profound understanding of ethical responsibilities as well as legal penalties and consequences. It remains one of the core examples whenever the topics of translation and law or translation and ethics come up.

7. Principles of Translation Ethics

Side along with *Chesterman's* formulation of his own ethical code that aims to achieve excellence in translation and that includes being a good translator, fairness, truthfulness, trustworthiness, empathy, and determination (2001), *Pym* (1997) provided a list of five ethical principles: first, the translator is responsible for any work he/she produces. Second, translation situations are not part of the translator's responsibility; however, he/she responds to the translation. Third, there should not be any opposition between the two cultures during the translation process. Fourth, the translation's cost must not weigh the benefits of the intercultural in question, and five, the translator is responsible for participating in lasting intercultural cooperation.

Like any other profession, accountability is a very important element in the translation process. Translators and interpreters are now held accountable for their translated and interpreted works. The arrest trial of *Mohamed Yousry* in the U.S. in 2005 is a case in point. *Mohamed* was an Arabic language court interpreter assigned to work on a terrorism trial and was convicted by the New York jury of helping and abetting an Egyptian terrorist organization. The translator was held accountable for translating a letter from the defendant at the instruction of the attorney. The charges were based on prison rules to prevent high-risk inmates from communicating with the rest of the world. This is the first time in U.S. legal history that an interpreter is being held accountable. According to *Baker* (2015), such a case is a reminder that translators and interpreters may be held responsible, and legal actions can be taken against them. In this respect, translators and interpreters must make the right ethical decisions cited in *Alwazna* (2014).

To sum up, translation is a profession with a unique code of ethics, a code that should be respected by any professional translator. Furthermore, it carries a list of norms that can be used as a pivotal tool to guide the translator and enlighten him/her about what is being accepted in a particular society and what is not to help him make thoughtful decisions and overcome any challenges that may face him/her while performing a translation task. A task that is more than a linguistic exercise, but also a socially and culturally embedded practice. By adhering to the mentioned ethical norms and principles, translators and interpreters can navigate the complexities of their profession while fostering cross-cultural understanding. As

the field evolves, ongoing dialogue and the development of ethical frameworks will remain essential to support and help translators in addressing emerging challenges and overcoming them.

The study predominantly highlights and examines ethical translation matters from Western academic perspectives. It lacks a comparative analysis of how ethical challenges may manifest differently across various cultural, legal, or regional translation practices. Also, it is important to note that ethical considerations evolve and change over time, influenced several factors such as socio-political changes and technological advancements. This study does not fully address how translators should adapt their ethical frameworks to these dynamic and ongoing changes. By addressing these limitations in future research, the study could provide a more comprehensive and practical understanding of the ethical, social dimensions, and social responsibilities of the translation profession.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

References

- [1] Alwazna, Rafat Y. "Ethical Aspects of Translation: Striking a Balance between Following Translation Ethics and Producing a TT for Serving a Specific Purpose." *English Linguistics Research*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2014, doi:10.5430/elr.v3n1p51.
- [2] Baker, Mona, and Carol Maier. "Ethics in Interpreter & Translator Training." *The Interpreter and Translator Trainer*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2011, pp. 1–14., doi:10.1080/13556509.2011.10798809.
- [3] "Creating New Lines of Transmission." *Gender in Translation: Cultural Identity and the Politics of Transmission*, by Sherry Simon, Routledge, 1996, pp. 37–39.
- [4] Nord, C. (1997). *Translating as a purposeful activity: Functionalist approaches explained*. Manchester: St Jerome.
- [5] Robinson, Douglas. "Becoming a Translator." 2003, pp. 25–26., doi: 10.4324/9780203441138.
- [6] *Translation and Gender: Translating in the Era of Feminism*, by Louise Von Flotow, Routledge, 1997, pp. 83–85.
- [7] Venuti, L. 1998. *The scandals of translation: Towards an ethics of difference*. London: Routledge.