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Professional translator ethics

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1 Introduction

This chapter examines the various and overlapping ethical questions facing the professional translator. I first outline who these professional translators are and then survey the range of ethical challenges they must contemplate, supported by a discussion of the way literature to date has accounted for and informed (or failed to inform) these considerations. The chapter offers a scholarship-based overview of the way professional translator ethics has been perceived in Translation Studies and, while this topic necessitates overlap with some broader discussions in the discipline, the focus remains squarely on the specific issues facing the professional translator. Furthermore, though translators and interpreters face some shared ethical issues, this chapter speaks only of translators (working with the written word) and not interpreters (who work with the spoken word; see also Chapter 14 “Conference interpreter ethics” and Chapter 15 “Ethics in public service interpreting” in this volume).

Unfortunately, research on professional translator ethics is marked by distinct gaps, and there is often a lack of unity between the sparse contributions. As such, beyond examining what has been said within Translation Studies, the fragmented discussions available necessitate a partly “non-academic” focus, and therefore material produced by practising translators represents a key source in this overview. My overarching illustration of areas of concern for the professional translator is further informed by codes of ethics and examples of professional practice drawn from resources including blog entries, translation forum posts, surveys, and social media discussions. These resources widen our scope, contextualise problems, and – for the professionals themselves – mitigate a sense of isolation. By offering insight into how professionals perceive certain topics and the issues they hold as important, these sources provide a window into the profession and illustrate the ethical tensions that exist between theoretical literature, industry documentation, and actual professional practice. Uniting these practice-based resources with the accumulation of academic knowledge in the field, I explore the broad range of ethical concerns facing the professional translator.
2 Defining the professional translator

Kaisa Koskinen and Helle V. Dam (2016, 258) comment on the range of conceptualisations available for the status of “professional” in translation (see Chapter 16 “Ethics of volunteering in translation and interpreting” in this volume for discussions of non-professional translators) and raise a number of important questions in seeking to define this group, which is a crucial yet challenging task. For example, does making a living through translation or belonging to a professional network or association make someone a professional? Must a professional translator have certain qualifications, years of experience, or staff status? Must they adhere to a code of ethics? Or is it more about the fact that they do something? In the unregulated translation profession, the latter is perhaps the nearest fit.

Schaffner (2019, 64) understands professional translation “as a paid occupation which requires a formal qualification,” yet even this seemingly expansive definition precludes a large number of translators who work as paid professionals without formal qualifications. The European Commission’s 2012 report, “The Status of the Translation Profession in the European Union,” states that the general title of translator is virtually unprotected, with none of the countries surveyed requiring any kind of formal qualification from people seeking to call themselves translators (Pym, Grin, Sfredo, and Chan 2012, 20). There are some exceptions, however, with the authors noting that official, protected translator status does exist in Denmark, Norway, Slovakia, and Sweden (Pym et al. 2012). There is also the more generalised exception of translators working on legal or otherwise “official” documents, whose work may be “certified,” “sworn,” or “authorised” depending on the country and context. In each of these cases, the requisite qualified individual or institution attests to the translators’ status (see Pym et al. 2012 for a full discussion of the status of translators of official documents). On a wider level, in most European countries there are no overarching requirements in terms of training, experience, continuing professional development, membership to professional institutions or communities, or levels of certification or status. For the most part, anyone can call themselves a professional translator. That said, some translation agencies do require their translators to have certain qualifications or experience, while academic and professional qualifications (for instance, MAs and BAs or certification provided by professional associations), professional memberships, and demonstrable working experience all serve as guarantees to potential clients and employers and thus indirectly correlate to perceived professionalism. Indeed, Pym et al. (2016) consider these to be “traditional signals of professional status,” while other signalling mechanisms have emerged alongside electronic communication (34).

The professional translator can work in a wide range of settings, on an eclectic range of materials, and across a plethora of subject domains, all while using a variety of tools to aid their practice. As such, to avoid descending into circuitous discussions of status and professionalism, I limit my working definition of the professional translator to the first half of Schaffner’s definition – simply translators getting paid for translation, where the payment they receive represents their main income. This excludes those who are employed, for example, as teachers or editors, but occasionally produce translations – a distinct mode of working known as “para-professional translation,” somewhat falling between work as a professional translator as defined here and hobby or volunteer work (Piekkari, Tietze, and Koskinen 2019). Furthermore, I adopt Dam and Zethsen’s (2010) incisive image of the settings in which these professionals work: in-house company translators, in-house agency translators, freelance translators, and staff translators working in the EU institutions. This covers a wide and representative swathe of professionals as, while a majority are self-employed freelancers working with agencies or direct clients, some translators are full-time in-house members of staff. Though I do not include literary translators...
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in my discussions, that is not to say that they are not professionals, but rather that the challenges and context within which they work are sufficiently distinct to warrant focused discussion elsewhere (see Chapter 13 “Literary translator ethics” in this volume). There is no definitive answer to the question of how many professional translators are practising worldwide, with estimates ranging from 200,000 to 700,000. Regardless, this is a significant number of people working in a considerable range of contexts – indeed, professional translation is arguably the biggest sector of translation and interpreting. Though the notion of a professional translator is fuzzy, there remains a belief that this notion does in fact exist and moves towards professionalisation are seen as a good thing. As we will see later, translators are bound by a profound sense of professional ethics and integrity in spite of this unregulated status in the vast majority of countries in which they work.

3 Historical trajectory

3.1 The basis of professional translator ethics

Translation Studies has long cast variously named conceptions of professional translation – ranging from “specialised” to “business” translation, or even the “non-literary” domain – as inferior to, or perhaps even conflicting with, literary translation (Rogers 2015). Though the idea of professional translation as a less problematic and thus less interesting sub-species of the translation world has been emphatically overturned in the twenty-first century, with a widespread desire to research areas tied to the profession (see Angelone, Ehrensberger-Dow, and Massey 2019), there remains a relative lack of research specifically focusing on ethical issues pertaining to the professional translator.

In Ben Van Wyke’s entry on “Translation and Ethics” in the Routledge Handbook of Translation Studies (2013), for instance, the professional translator is entirely neglected. This is not an oversight from the author, but rather is indicative of the discipline’s focus. Nor has practice-based research used ethics as the main lens through which to regulate this practice. Instead, discussions of quality (both in academic and professional circles) and the creation of standards have provided the regulatory framework for adequate translation service provision and its control. However, there is an imperative for work on translation ethics to apply to, or at least refer to, the professional translator. In this section, I outline the traditional basis of ethical concerns for the professional translator. Examining translation codes of ethics and Andrew Chesterman’s profession-oriented ethics provides our basis for subsequent discussion and, when used in conjunction with professionals’ own concerns emanating from the area, enables us to move beyond initial sketches.

The origin of a professional translator’s ethics lies in codes of ethics, which continue to shape ethical decision-making to this day (see Chapter 20 “Ethics codes for interpreters and translators” in this volume for a more detailed discussion of codes). Though codes of ethics have a long history, they emerged as a key tool in professional contexts in the 1990s, offering prescriptive guidelines on how a professional should act. In the context of professional translation, codes function as the working translator’s primary point of contact with ethics and represent both a key tool in defining ethical translation and informing ethical decision-making. As Christina Schaffner puts it, “codes lay down principles and guidelines for exercising the profession and for the behaviour towards clients, colleagues and other professionals” (Schaffner 2019, 65).

The UK-based Institute of Translation and Interpreting’s (ITI) 2016 Code of Conduct offers a representative image of the areas pertinent to a professional translator’s ethics. The code is divided according to four key principles: (a) honesty and integrity, (b) professional competence,
(c) client confidentiality and trust, and (d) relationships with other members, and outlines eight professional values. Though these provide some useful general guidelines and signal an array of areas of consideration that scholars and professional translators have sought to explain, they are far from perfect. The first value, for instance – an overarching call for members to “convey the meaning between people and cultures faithfully, accurately and impartially” (ITI 2016, 5) – echoes now-outdated conceptions of translation as straightforward meaning transfer. Indeed, this is among an array of limitations have been noted by scholars (Baker 2011; Drugan 2011; Lambert 2018; McDonough-Dolmaya 2011) and, as a result of these limitations, it is clear that translators do not or cannot always adhere to codes in their practice. Though a possibility, this is not necessarily due to a lack of willingness from the translator, but rather difficulties in interpretation and application.

This limited applicability is also perceived within the profession, and yet codes have a clear impact on received notions of ethics among professional translators. There is an almost universal acceptance within the industry that they can be a positive force and serve as a badge of honour. For instance, the Chartered Institute of Linguists (CIOL), the leading UK-based membership body for language professionals, advises translators to join professional associations as a way to stand out as a professional and lists their code as a key benefit of membership (CIOL 2018). From this perspective, the codes’ mere existence seems to provide ethical status to the translator, suggesting that if a professional is bound to a code, through association membership for example, then they are automatically an ethical translator. This is unfortunately not the case. Furthermore, many blog articles from translators and translation companies draw their ethical principles for translators from codes. For instance, in their “Brief Guide to Ethics for Interpreters and Translators,” translation company Ulatus offers the following principles for a professional translator to follow, all drawn from the International Medical Interpreters Association Code of Ethics: maintain confidentiality, be accurate, be sensitive to cultural misunderstandings, maintain impartiality, be professional, stay up-to-date, and pursue professional development (Ulatus 2016).

With these overarching foundations in mind, we move to the discipline of Translation Studies. Though a number of theoretical discussions of ethics do not refer to the actual practice of translation, several scholars have attempted to shift focus to this issue. In his 2001 paper “Proposal for a Hieronymic Oath,” Chesterman attempts to draw up a professional code of ethics for translators that would surpass many of the codes used in the profession. Chesterman productively divides ethics into four key areas (truth, loyalty, understanding, and trust) before critiquing each of these areas individually and eventually drawing up his ultimate “oath.”

His first key area outlines an ethics of representation that deals with fidelity, accuracy, truth, and how to select and transmit a good, or the best, interpretation of a source text. This is a central issue in several leading theories of ethics in Translation Studies (comprehensively covered in Part I in this volume), though in many cases we find a disconnect between much of this literature and actual professional practice. Indeed, a brief glance at working practices among professional translators provides an initial counterpoint to a number of the theoretical discussions. Anthony Pym (2012) draws attention to the way ethics has traditionally been perceived as an either-or situation. We favour either “the source language-culture-text-speaker or the target language-culture-text-speaker” (5). This calls to mind the ethical concerns voiced by Antoine Berman (1999; see also Chapter 6 “Ethics in Berman and Meschonnic” in this volume) or Lawrence Venuti (1995; see also Chapter 10 “Venuti and the ethics of difference” in this volume), with both scholars eloquently outlining the potential perils of target-based renderings. Yet despite the allure of these ideas and their increased relevance in other contexts, such as literary translation, it is extremely difficult to reconcile the use of resistant strategies with the practice of the professional translator. Day-to-day practice for professional translators revolves around producing...
translated texts that read like original pieces of target language writing and move away from the source language style and structure to display no hint of having been translated. NAJIT – the US-based National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators – for instance, advocate for this practice in a document outlining translators’ responsibilities: “[t]he finished document should read as if it had originally been written in the target language for the target audience” (NAJIT 2017), reaffirming the important role that translation associations hold in setting ethical agendas for professional translators.

In many professional context, edits are made freely, sections are cut down and moved around, lexical elements and even entire sections can be deleted if they are deemed to be problematic or unsuitable for the context of publication. Of course, Berman and Venuti’s primary focus was literary translation, but this is nevertheless indicative of the gap that exists between wider literature on ethics in Translation Studies and the reality of professional practice. While raising invaluable and intriguing questions, views centred around textual fidelity, disruption, or marginalisation alone do not provide the full picture when it comes to the various considerations facing the professional translator. Unless we are to accuse the entire global body of translators of unethical practice, we must look elsewhere for our theoretical underpinnings.

3.2 Moving beyond the text

In order to move beyond this traditional idea of textual fidelity, and to better represent the realities of professional practice, Chesterman, among others, considers the embedded nature of the translator within the professional context of translation. The second of his four key areas, an ethics of service, embodies this shift and falls in line with functional models of translation. Here, discussions revolve around providing a service whereby the “translator is deemed to act ethically if the translation complies with the instructions set by the client and fulfils the aim of the translation as set by the client and accepted or negotiated by the translator” (Chesterman 2001, 140). In line with Christiane Nord’s ethics of loyalty (Nord 2001; see also Chapter 5 “Functional translation theories and ethics” in this volume), this second model places ethics much more firmly within the domain of the professional translator, considering the wider context in which the interaction takes place, and Chesterman extends this thread further still in his third model focusing on communication. This third model of ethics deals not with respect for the Other in terms of a textual respect (which is covered in the first form), but rather with the question of communicating with other people, with the translator viewed as a mediator seeking to achieve cross-cultural communication (Chesterman 2001, 141). This form of ethics is most amply explored by Anthony Pym via his conception of cooperation, discussed further later.

Chesterman’s (2001) fourth model, meanwhile, is a norm-based ethics. These norms are representative of ethical values at work in a particular place and time and thus equates ethical behaviour with socially sanctioned expectations (141). Though Chesterman considered norms within the context of Gideon Toury’s work in Descriptive Translation Studies, primarily focusing on textual norms and expectations of what a translation should look like, subsequent discussions in this chapter demonstrate how ethical decision-making is partly governed by norms shaped by professional practice, as attested by translators in blogs, on social media, and on translation forums, which accumulate and consolidate these norms.

While these four models of ethics have offered a basis for subsequent (and some contemporaneous) discussions of ethics, they are not without their problems. The main issue lies in reconciling their differing ethical values. Indeed, the model of truth is likely to conflict with each of the other values due to the tension that exists between the various demands placed upon the translator: how can we be “truthful” or “faithful” in terms of the content if our client asks us to
deviate from that content, for instance? This is something that Chesterman unfortunately does not address. Instead, he accepts that these models are provisional, partial, and cannot be broken down into a suitable hierarchy, a stumbling block that accompanies many models of ethics.

Turning to Chesterman’s code, his nine-point “Hieronymic Oath” addresses some invaluable general professional issues. For example, point six deftly handles confidentiality, calling for the translator to respect clients’ professional secrets and “not to exploit client’s information for personal gain” (Chesterman 2001, 153), while point seven, regarding competence, states: “I will be honest about my own qualifications and limitations; I will not accept work that is outside my competence” (153). Yet cause for concern arises at multiple points. Chesterman’s third point of “I will use my expertise to maximise communication and minimise misunderstanding across language barriers” (153), for instance, leaves the key question of precisely how to do this unanswered. Despite adding a few paragraphs on the subjects of accuracy, loyalty, etc., the question of how the translator should communicate remains to be answered, a topic that is explored in more detail in Pym’s cooperation-based ethics. Furthermore, Chesterman’s fourth guideline, which states that translators will not “represent their source texts in unfair ways” (153), suggests a neutral, detached view of translation – or a deference to the “original” content no matter what. Subsequent discussions of impartiality and translating questionable content will shed further light on the possibility of such an aim.

Ultimately, Chesterman’s article clearly identified the complexity involved in developing an ethics for the professional translator and accessibly introduced a range of key terms and concepts. It is representative of a wider move from conceptions of fidelity to considerations of translation in context, although his narrowed focus on the professional side of ethics – placing personal and socio-cultural concerns and activist roles beyond the domain of ethics – requires further exploration. Though his first model has limitations in terms of practical application, the other three can function perfectly well within the professional translator’s work; we can certainly abide by our client’s wishes, communicate with other agents, or follow norms, but these do not answer all of the questions that translators are acutely concerned with. Indeed, a number of areas that are deemed important by professional translators are not mentioned in Chesterman’s overview. Julie McDonough-Dolmaya (2011) offers a detailed image of these areas by studying topics discussed within the TranslatorsCafe.com forum – a sub-section of a popular profession-oriented website within which translators can ask questions and enter into dialogue with colleagues and peers. In her study, McDonough-Dolmaya listed forum threads on TranslatorsCafe according to the number of posts related to each topic. Top of the list, with 245 posts (out of a total 1,600), were discussions of rates – how much are or should translators be getting paid – immediately drawing our attention to the contrast in focus between codes (only a relatively small percentage of codes actually include stipulations on rates), theoretical literature, and the issues pertinent to professionals. Areas of concern highlighted in this paragraph are explored further in the following sections.

4 Core issues

4.1 Cooperation and responsibility

A key unanswered question is that of a professional translator’s overall responsibility, with potential areas to consider including responsibility towards the flourishing of the profession, wider social causes, and the translators’ own wellbeing. While I have noted an initial move beyond textual views based around fidelity, Anthony Pym (2012) seeks to consolidate the move beyond this realm while drawing up a clearly delineated hierarchy of ethical responsibility. Rather than
seeking to address the question of ethics within the act of translation – how we translate – Pym instead considers the bigger question of why we are translating. Indeed, he suggests, “if we know why we translate, then we can deduce how we should translate and perhaps even what we should translate in each situation” (12).

Pym’s major work on ethics, Pour une éthique du traducteur (1997), which was translated and updated in English as On Translator Ethics in 2012, paints ethics as having two levels. As with many theories of ethics, Pym (2012) states that it contains “collective, professional aspects as well as the translator’s individual morality” (15), yet his professional translator’s ethics is largely based on an idea of what the profession should be striving towards while the personal element takes on more of a marginal role. Within this context, Pym creates a social ethics that seeks to promote the process of translators’ professionalisation. This acts as a guiding principle to contribute to intercultural cooperation, a central concept in Pym’s ideas that he describes as “abstract but situational, since the nature of cooperation depends on numerous factors specific to each case” (2012, 9), a signal of the importance of contextual factors within ethics. Pym goes on to produce a number of overarching principles: the translator’s first loyalty is to their profession and then they are responsible for the decision to translate, the probable effects of their translations (9), and subsequently to the matter (the text), the client, and other translators. These domains overlap to a degree with Chesterman’s ethics of representation and ethics of service, but paint a more clear-cut picture in terms of the hierarchy that is drawn and the range and extent of responsibilities.

Yet the issue of responsibility is far from settled. In addition to discussions of personal agency later, the question of responsibility beyond the profession persists. Though Pym (2012) states, “there is no need for translators to claim (or to be attributed with) any commitment to the content of what they are translating” (67) (and, drawing from the aforementioned principles, they are not fully responsible for the consequences of translating that content), other scholars have suggested that translators should be committed to the ideologies behind that content generally in order to give voice to non-hegemonic thinking (activist ethics is covered in detail in Chapter 17 “Ethics of activist translation and interpreting,” albeit in a more general context). As Haidee Kruger and Elizabeth Crots (2014) explain when discussing the general nature of professional translator ethics, “there is a responsibility to resist situations of injustice or unfairness founded on responsibility towards society at large” (149). However, the economically driven context of professional translation, with a number of asymmetrical power relations at work, has meant that this element of responsibility has not yet been successfully incorporated into discussions of professional translation. As Pym puts it (2012, 87–88), “[a]sking a translator to save the world is sometimes like asking an infant to read.”

4.2 Neutrality and personal ethics

Aside from notions of cooperation, Pym’s principal postulate is that translators are primarily intercultural agents located in the intersections of cultures and not within one single culture (2012, 9). In this middle ground, translators are “dominated by the ethics of cooperation,” “primarily responsible not to the source text writer, the client or their readers but to their fellow translators” (Koskinen 2000, 80). Though Pym (2012) accepts that translators may have to choose between two sides at certain points, the fundamental core of his ethics is “strictly intercultural” (167). However, this change in understanding is carried out in order to argue that translators are somehow detached from national interests, benevolent but impartial helpers, in a move aimed to raise the profile of translation. While Pym acknowledges that “[w]e know full well that professional subjectivity never suppresses individual subjectivity in the intimate space of doubt” (2012, 80), his ideas do not fully incorporate this individual subjectivity, perhaps because
illuminating the professional translator’s subjective nature would be problematic in terms of the position he carves out in the interculture.

The idea of translators as neutral characters in between cultures has been criticised by a number of scholars. Lieven Tack (2001), for instance, states that “[i]nformation does not flow freely, not even in intercultures; it is inevitably anchored, situated, appropriated and inscribed in complex ideological contexts” (301). This objection is vital, as it not only problematises some of Pym’s ethical underpinnings, but also articulates a much wider point in terms of professional translator ethics. Despite the fact that it features in both professional documentation and scholarly thought, it is widely accepted that total neutrality or impartiality on the part of the professional translator is an illusion (see, for instance, Baker 2006).

Interculturality is certainly a feature of the translator’s existence, but the translator is not value-free. Kristiina Adballah (2011) eloquently encapsulates a generalised view of non-neutrality in the conclusion to her paper on training student translators in relation to ethical issues in the profession, stating, “in the end it is the moral agent herself who decides which course of action to take in resolving an ethical dilemma, based on her own moral values” (148). From an ethical perspective, we must question the personal and examine what it is that these active agents are interested in and concerned about.

Linked to this question of neutrality is the issue of the divide between personal and professional ethics. Though the literature on the ethics of the professional translator is scarce, a handful of articles consider personal agency as a relevant dimension of professional translator ethics. Indeed, this is something that Kruger and Crots’ (2014) work partly addresses. Linking the theoretical and professional sides of translation and offering a rare attempt to explore ethical decision-making in a quantitative and empirical manner, Kruger and Crots tested how a group of professional translators (that this group is deemed to be representative of the South African population of professional translators is the only detail that is given) actually handle problematic ethical dilemmas in practice. They selected a corpus of nine texts from a range of contexts including novels, blog entries, and song lyrics, and distributed them to thirty-one South African translators, with each of the texts containing elements that could be seen as ethically problematic (racist or sexist language, for instance). The translators were then asked what their translation methodology would be if they were presented with the texts as professional translators. They found that respondents selected strategies based on personal and professional reasoning at almost the same rate (professional ethics 51% of the time, personal 49%). The scholars suggest, “[i]t therefore seems as if personal ethics does play a substantial role in the decisions made when translating a text, and professional status does not suppress the tendency to articulate ethical motivations from a personal, rather than a professional, subject position and frame of reference” (Kruger and Crots 2014, 165). In other words, professional translator ethics must acknowledge this personal dimension.

Placing this in the context of what has come before, professional translator ethics should not only consider professional responsibility to the client, the text, and the profession (built upon Pym’s ethics), but also a personal ethics “founded on loyalty towards the translator’s own system of beliefs” (Kruger and Crots 2014, 149). There is a complex interplay between these systems in the translator’s decision-making processes and, while there remains a distinction between personal and professional ethics, Kruger and Crots afford it a more central role in ethics overall, acknowledging that “[t]ranslators are humans, and like all humans, they have a system of beliefs that inform how they choose to live their lives” (2014, 149). By contrast, Pym’s move to the question of “Why translate?” which is answered with the call to promote cooperation, limits a translator’s responsibilities and sidesteps the issue of personal engagement. For him, the ethical translator may sometimes decide that it is better not to translate at all. Unfortunately, this is
not fully representative of the way that professional translators work, in part due to the precise asymmetrical power relations that Pym notes elsewhere. Cooperation is not the professional translator’s only consideration, and the decision to translate is often taken based upon their own sense of what is or is not acceptable, or necessary, not simply whether their input will benefit the profession as a whole. For instance, using the example of morally questionable content in a text, in a 2020 survey of 1,264 freelance translators, UK-based professional translation agency Inbox Translation asked translators whether they had ever refused, or would refuse, to work on texts relating to a wide range of traditionally taboo subjects. Only 17% of respondents said that they would not refuse work in any subject area, reaffirming the inescapably personal nature of decisions on what is and is not acceptable (personal correspondence with managing director of Inbox Translation, April 2020). Considering the human agent involved and their personal beliefs and moral viewpoints represents another step forward in the development of the field.

### 4.3 Consolidating professionals’ ethical concerns

With the translator’s role increasingly viewed as that of an active mediator, in ethical terms they must therefore be able to assume responsibility for their work. This stands in contrast with Pym’s and Chesterman’s belief that the professional translator is not responsible for potential future socio-cultural or political effects, nor for the content that they are translating (Kruger and Crots 2014, 152–153). However, though the translator is now portrayed as an independent being in research, in some circumstances professionals’ own views remain rooted in perhaps outdated images of what is ethical. Further responses to Kruger and Crots’s aforementioned study allude to the fact that considerations such as accuracy and fidelity are still central to professional translators’ image of the “ethical translator.” They found that literal translation was the most common strategy when dealing with their ethically problematic texts – 68% of the respondents followed the methodology – and this was something that they equated with traditional ideas of fidelity to the text being viewed as an ethical obligation. Omission, meanwhile, was the least common strategy, with translators clearly showing an unwillingness to make radical alterations, while neutralising, adaptation, and refusal to translate were selected considerably less often than “literal” methodologies. Furthermore, though factors such as age, the nature of the ethical problem, and years of experience were shown to influence decision-making, these impacts never overruled the overall preference for faithful translation (2014, 177). This underscores the gaps and tensions that exist between professional understandings of ethics and areas of academic study.

Given these tensions, can this widened focus on personal stakes feed into more practical discussions such as those relating to rates of pay? Or are discussions of rates also based primarily on recourse to rather outdated and unsophisticated notions of ethics? As noted earlier, rates are seen as an overwhelmingly pertinent ethical issue by professional translators. Leading freelance translation-oriented website ProZ.com does not have a specific “Ethics” sub-forum but rather many forum entries on ethical issues can be found within their “Money Matters,” “Business Issues,” “Being Independent,” and “Scams” sections, hinting towards the fluid nature of the boundaries between ethical and economic concerns in the professional domain. Of course, the issue of rates is not a pressing one for all translators. Certainly, it is less of an issue for salaried, in-house employees but is clearly at the forefront of the minds of those who negotiate fees with agents and clients, often on a project-by-project basis.

Within Translation Studies, there is relatively little comment on the question of rates of pay as an ethical object of enquiry. Indeed, Abdallah is alone in giving serious consideration to specifically economic concerns in her work on ethics. She notes that as micro-entrepreneurs, translators have the right to make a profit according to the basic tenets of business ethics (2011,
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131) and draws our attention to the tensions that this dual role often entails, with translators struggling to reconcile the calls of codes of conduct (their “deontological ethics”) and traditional notions of the “ethical” with these utilitarian guidelines of business ethics. This desire to situate the translator in a wider and more representative contextual setting – taking into account translation as it happens in the profession – is a valuable part of Abdallah’s work and reiterates the pertinence of finances within ethical discussions (see Abdallah 2012 for a fascinating discussion of the professional translator’s production networks and their agency within that complex framework), but focus is placed at a more overarching level.

Meanwhile, Pym’s (2012) fourth ethical principle does mention an economic calculation of sorts, but it is prescribed in a rather abstract manner and does not simply refer to monetary cost. He states, “Transaction costs should not exceed the total benefits ensuing from the corresponding cooperative interaction” (167). This principle concisely suggests that translators ensure that the work is worth it, and Pym quite rightly draws our attention to the potential, long-term negative effects of adopting low rates as a translator. While, as he puts it, “[l]ow-cost translations can be virtuous; they can widen the range of cooperative situations,” by considering the long-term flourishing of the profession, the practice of driving down colleagues’/competitors’ rates in order to secure jobs from clients in the short-term can be viewed as contributing to an overall devaluation of the profession(al) and a resultant cycle of diminishing rates in the longer term.

Following McDonough-Dolmaya’s allusion to the value of exploring further profession-oriented networks, professional translator’s own considerations can once again inform discussions. While she limits her suggestions to exploring other forums and carrying out surveys of translators, social media is a valuable tool that certainly falls into this category. Given the often isolated nature of the translator’s role, social media represents a key resource in professional networking and marketing, as well as providing another highly populated forum for exchange and the formation of discrete groups of practice. There are sizeable communities of translators on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook, with a number of groups hosting thousands of members, and the platforms provide a wide range of contexts in which translators can interact, from language-specific communities discussing specialised texts to more informal groups sharing light-hearted, work-related posts.

The range of topics covered and the variety of responses received from practising professionals also make these sites a potentially valuable resource for researchers. Though relatively few studies have been conducted in this area to date, Samuel Läubli and David Orrego-Carmona (2017) successfully demonstrated the potential of posts on the sites mentioned earlier when investigating translator’s perceptions of machine translation, and this approach could productively be applied to ethical issues. Unsurprisingly, discussions of rates feature on a somewhat regular basis within numerous groups, and even a cursory glance at posts can offer some insight. This ostensibly economic issue is embedded within a network of personal interests, often considering the translator’s (and client’s) status and financial situation. While members often reach a loose consensus on matters, it is never simply a case of formulating or referring to clear-cut advice in terms of detached professional guidelines.

Overall, these discussions allude to the personal and variable nature of opinions on the topic while reaffirming the way in which peers can and do act as moral and professional guides. The rate you accept or request as a translator is a personal, subjective matter, and though there are some professional norms that can guide decisions, in this area these are primarily drawn from informal sources. For an issue such as confidentiality, meanwhile, there are more concrete professional guidelines – such as Chesterman’s call to respect secrets – but this does not mute that inescapable personal voice. What if you are asked to translate material that contains potentially dangerous information? Can you then justify breaching confidentiality?
5 Emerging issues: agency and expanded responsibility in professional translator ethics

Any future professional translator ethics that seeks to represent the way these professionals work should embrace both professional and personal, subjective elements, and at least acknowledge the limitations of current codes and ethical provision, with professional translators’ working methodologies inextricably bound to their personal stances. Solutions and methodologies always return to the individual – there are no definitive, overarching answers – and further studies could shed more light on this. In the case of Kruger and Crots’s work, they remind us that their findings serve as explanatory hypotheses, which must be tested more rigorously in a wider range of contexts. Future research must not only re-affirm their conclusions and consider other ethical issues, but also seek to extend these methods to a wider community. Elsewhere, forums and other sources examining the profession, such as empirical studies, can provide valuable insight into this fuzzy domain, exploring the ways in which translators call upon problematic notions of ethics or virtual, informal, and unregulated networks to concretise their ethical decision-making.

The issue of socially desirable response bias is another important question to consider – all translators presumably want to come across as good, “moral” professionals, and this may impact upon results. Finally, Kruger and Crots’s study raises the question of where ethics comes into translation. Rather than all translation being an ethical question, does ethics emerge (or is it perhaps most pertinent) when the text deals with sexism, racism, or swearing, for instance?

There is little research suggesting that the current marginal focus on ethics for the professional translator is going to increase, and there are seemingly no new professional documents such as codes or other insights that will suddenly inform the way a translator engages with ethical concerns, despite space for such developments. That said, there is certainly an increasing interest in this human, agentic side of the translator in an ethics-specific context. Though subjectivity in translation is not an emerging issue, the application of this notion to ethical debates in particular is an ongoing current of thought, widening our object of enquiry. Take Andrew Chesterman’s (2017) concept of *telos*, for instance (368). This intriguing concept (which sits alongside *Skopos*) describes the personal goal of the translator in a specific context. Thinking back to a number of examples of the way in which professional translators work, the potential value of this concept is immediately clear. Rather than simply aiming to produce a text that fulfils a client’s translation brief (as a service-based ethics may aim to do), detaching ourselves from the personal stakes involved, a telos allows us to acknowledge a number of personal factors involved in translational decisions. For instance, the desire to forward your own career in translation, to be paid, and to satisfy the commissioners of the work to ensure that you continue to be paid. Given the need to make ethical decisions based on our own moral values, this framework could productively be shifted to professional translator ethics. Chesterman’s recognition that translators do indeed translate to stay alive and that translating just for the money is an acceptable telos is intriguing, and yet this concept has received little attention on a wider scale and has not been applied to this specific context.

Of course, this focus on the individual translator could potentially risk losing sight of other streams of thought such as activism and wider responsibility. In this respect, one emerging line of enquiry that extends our thinking beyond the narrow professional sphere is Joanna Drugan’s (2017) work on ethics. Building upon themes of responsibility and the link to activist ethics, Drugan’s take on professional ethics is rooted in social responsibility, understood as a “responsibility to the broader social context beyond the immediate translated encounter” (128). Drugan begins from the assumption that the translation profession is not only a concrete entity, but also one that can be considered alongside the likes of fields such as law and medicine. She explains
how doctors or social workers, for example, “must complete formal education in ethics and subscribe to publicly available and contractually enforced Codes of Conduct” (126) and how they have access to support and guidance (supervision, mentors, and refresher training) when struggling with ethical issues – something that is clearly lacking in the case of professional translation. While Drugan does acknowledge that these professions are not directly comparable to translation – indeed the extent to which developments from other professions can successfully be mapped onto the unregulated and heterogeneous domain of professional translation requires further exploration – there is a certain contextual overlap and a case for the ethical infrastructure on offer to serve as a model for advancements in the translation profession. As Drugan sees it, the tradition of social responsibility within “caring” professions makes them a more positive exemplar than corporate sectors, which form the basis of current codes of ethics for professional translators. More widely, the prevalence of issues including confidentiality, fair rates, and the requirement to turn down assignments you are not qualified to undertake in these professions is indicative of the possibility of drawing insights that are relevant to the professional translator from other domains. Indeed, perhaps the answers available elsewhere are more sophisticated or satisfactory than those accumulated with the professional translator as the central focus.

6 Conclusion

In recent decades, Translation Studies has moved away from narrow conceptions of accuracy and fidelity (see Pym 2001) and continues to question issues of responsibility, agency, and the nature of the ethical. The discussions in this chapter illuminate the intersection between personal and professional ethics in light of the realities of translation practice, supporting the notion that the two cannot be separated. The professional translator’s ethics is in part guided by institutional documentation and in part by interactions with peers and colleagues to concretise their ethical decision-making. Professional and personal stakes intersect and are interdependent. We must take into account professional norms, the impact of associations, and documentation such as codes, but must also recognise that it is ultimately the individual who decides where their interests lie, which resources they want to draw upon, and how to act when those resources reveal certain limitations. The research shows that the “ethical” professional translator is an independent, idiosyncratic, and inherently subjectivised decision-making agent, eschewing notions of neutrality. The professional’s ethics is undoubtedly context-dependent, with interactions involving a range of participants, interests, and beliefs, often conflicting or diverging.

On a wider level, how can we elicit positive change? How can we help translators develop an awareness of pertinent issues and potential courses of action? A heavy focus is placed on translator training (see Chapter 22 “Ethics in translator and interpreter education” and Chapter 23 “Ethics of translator and interpreter education” in this volume) and teaching translators to critically consider the ethical decisions that they have to take. Pym’s 1992 monograph concludes in calling for teaching translation to open up possibilities for action, and for embracing the plurality and idiosyncrasy of method that is inherent to translation. This is something that is echoed by a number of scholars (for instance Abdallah 2012; Baker 2011; Drugan and Megone 2011), who call for a focus on teaching and instilling students with critical awareness. The fact that the reflective translation commentary is a valuable and hugely popular method of assessment in the academic study of translation (Shih 2018) suggests that these considerations have been successfully integrated into the training setting. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that the same critical awareness is not naturally enforced in the profession, where professional translators do not necessarily have access to any formal training. Drugan’s (2017) links to social...
responsibility and other professions perhaps open up the possibility for change outside of the confines of education, and there remains a clear gap for the reshaping of professional ethical underpinnings.

Ultimately, there is no consensus about ethical translator behaviour in this context. While some general guidelines such as rejecting work that falls outside of your linguistic and cultural expertise or not divulging clients’ private information are wide reaching and regularly observed by professional translators, exceptions can easily be found for even the most deeply engrained practices. Do we conclude that what is required is more policing in the profession and more stringent measures to enforce regulations, or perhaps accept that the hugely fluid nature of the translation profession also necessitates a more fluid understanding of ethics for the professional translator? As with many of the areas discussed in this chapter, the jury is still out. Professional translator ethics involves a complex interaction of competing personal and professional interests and concerns within a variable network with its own idiosyncratic power relations. Future research in the field could fruitfully incorporate considerations of both internal and external resources – internally the translator calls upon what they think and feel is right, something that is unique to the individual and context-dependent, while external elements include institutional documentation and interactions with peers and colleagues. This distinction between, and combination of, internal and external dimensions of professional translator ethics may offer a productive way to reinvigorate the domain.

List of related topics

Ethics Codes for Interpreters and Translators; Translator Ethics; Ethics in the Translation Industry; Ethics of Activist Translation and Interpreting; Ethics of Translator and Interpreter Education

Note

1 The other topics, in descending frequency (including the number of posts in brackets), were “professional development” (222), conflict resolution (also included in “rates”) (85), professionalism (75), accuracy (74), subcontracting (50), advertising (43), software/technology (33), working languages (25), terms/working conditions (23), texts for illegal/immoral ends (17), competence (16), and copyright (11).

References


Further reading


A vital resource in the establishment of an ethics of the professional translator. Chesterman breaks down a number of core ideas before developing his translator’s “oath.”

An insight into the concept of social responsibility and the potential for translation to draw upon other domains, such as social work and health care.


A valuable study that examines a translator’s decision-making when faced with potentially ethically questionable material.


A rare examination of relevant ethical issues from the professional translator’s point of view. Demonstrates the potential of studying practice-oriented networks in uncovering and exploring ethical issues that arise during the practice of translation.


A sustained reflection on professional translator ethics, engaging with ideas on both a theoretical and more practical level. One of very few efforts to explore professional translator ethics in real depth.