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Literary translator ethics

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1 Introduction

Literary translators reformulate the texts of others, making them accessible to new audiences in other languages, other cultural contexts, and other times. Together with the other agents involved, literary translators decide what texts they translate, how they translate them, and how they present these translations to the world. During this process, countless ethical dilemmas may arise: should a racist or sexist expression be modified? May jokes, cultural allusions, and unintelligible passages be explicated or even skipped entirely? Is it okay to use phrases from the source language to signal a text’s foreign origins – or, conversely, is it okay to standardize a character’s dialect, or turn poetry and rhymes into prose? May titles and plots be changed to boost sales? Should obvious translation errors be corrected in later editions? Is it ethically acceptable to reuse the words and phrasings of a previous translation of the same text?

The aim of this chapter is to review key texts on literary translation ethics from the last fifty years to find tips that may be useful for practitioners and students when facing such ethical dilemmas. None of these dilemmas have simple answers. What may be considered the ethically best solution will largely depend on what is given priority, such as accountability towards the author, truthfulness vis-à-vis the source text, the instructions from the publisher, or the consequences for either the source or the target culture.

The scholars reviewed here differ in their perspectives on what ethical literary translation entails. This is not surprising, considering the complexity of the many people, texts, and cultures involved in literary translation. Some scholars even oppose the idea that translation studies should dedicate time to discussing ethics. Others, for example Pym (2012, 166), do not doubt that there is “good and bad in what translators do” and that ethical responsibility is not solely a textual issue but also a social one. According to this view, translators are “responsible for the capacity of their work to contribute to long-term stable, cross-cultural cooperation” (Pym 2012, 167; see also Chapter 11 “Translator ethics” in this volume).

In recent decades, some translation scholars have increasingly argued that the field should examine translation in relation to global concerns more generally. Ethical issues related to migration is one such topic (see, for example, Polezzi 2012; Alvstad 2020). Environmental issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss, eco-migration, and linguicide have also been put forward...
as twenty-first-century concerns that both translation scholars and practitioners should address (Cronin 2017, 13; see also Chapter 19 “Translation and posthumanism” in this volume).

Global challenges, such as climate change and the difficulty migrants face when establishing themselves in new environments, may at first sight seem to exceed the immediate focus of the translation dilemmas formulated earlier, and possibly also be considered less relevant for literary translators than for translators and interpreters who translate and interpret “people” (Polezzi 2012, 347). Upon closer examination, however, it will become apparent that certain ways of handling literary translation dilemmas may create wrong and stereotyped images of authors, source books, source literatures, and source cultures, or to the exploitation of others’ intellectual property (see Batchelor 2018; Washbourne 2018; Alvstad 2020). In turn, this is likely to impede the type of long-term cross-cultural understanding advocated by Pym (2012, 167).

2 Historical trajectory

The most well-known works on literary translation ethics from the 1970s are text-oriented, focusing either on poetics, as Meschonnic does, or on interpretation, as Steiner does. Both Meschonnic and Steiner cherish rather clear – and indeed very different – ideals for what ethical literary translation is.

Towards the end of the 1970s and throughout the 1980s, a new research paradigm came into being: Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS). DTS advocates the empirical study of translations and their literary and cultural contexts. Unlike Meschonnic and Steiner, it refrains from prescribing what characterizes ethical and unethical practices.

The 1990s saw an increased focus on power and translation. Lawrence Venuti launched his ethics of differences, which advocates “visibility” and “foreignization” as an ethical translation practice (see later and Chapter 10 “Venuti and the ethics of difference” in this volume). Feminist and postcolonial approaches to translation were also developed (see later, and Chapter 8 “The ethics of postcolonial translation” and Chapter 9 “Feminist translation ethics” in this volume). These in turn were complemented by sociological approaches, such as Pym’s translator-oriented work mentioned in the introduction (see Chapter 11 “Translator ethics” in this volume) and Gouanvic’s sociological critique of strategy-oriented approaches of the kind advocated by Berman (see also Chapter 6 “Ethics in Berman and Meschonnic” in this volume) and Venuti.

Over the last two decades, there has been an increase in studies on complex translation contexts such as retranslation (i.e. new translations of the same text into the same language, see Koskinen 2018) and indirect translation (i.e. a translation of a translation, see Assis Rosa, Pięta, and Maia 2017). Retranslations and indirect translations are often based on, or at least influenced by, more than one source text. Studies oriented toward complex translation situations typically bring attention to ethical issues, which is not surprising since they involve more agents, texts, and cultures that can be ethically wronged.

3 Core issues and topics

3.1 The poetic approach (Henri Meschonnic)

Meschonnic (2011, 173) was a text-oriented scholar primarily concerned with “what words do.” His essays on poetics, ethics, and translation appeared in French from the 1970s and onwards. His work has been lesser known in English, and the first book-length translation of his work into English, *Ethics and Politics of Translating*, did not appear until 2011, two years after his death.
Meschonnic’s main interest is in the poetics of language, not least the relationship between rhythm (broadly understood) and meaning. To Meschonnic, there are two types of unethical translations: those that only render the meaning of the words, and those that only translate formal features of texts. Meschonnic (2011, 172–173) calls such translation practices “unwriting” since they destroy the way textual meaning is produced. By simply rendering features as individual units, such practices overlook the interaction of features within the text. Unethical translation thus ignores that there is just as much meaning in what words do as in what they say.

Ethical translation requires translators to instead focus precisely on what words do and how they do it. According to Meschonnic, a literary text will use unconventional formulations and deliberate breaches of habitual ways of writing in order to produce meaning. An ethical literary translation practice would then be to use the target language in similar ways, aiming to reproduce “what the original text does to the source language” (Meschonnic 2011, 172). This demands attention to how meaning is produced, that is to how the words and sounds are organized in ways to “stand out and gain power of expression” (Meschonnic 2011, 172). Meschonnic’s word for this ethical translation practice is “poem-translating.”

Meschonnic’s own work often dealt with Bible translations, but since his focus was on the rhythm of the text, his work has a literary orientation. Even today he is still probably the translation scholar who has emphasized most strongly that translation practices which give priority to content over form are unethical, since they destroy the literary rhythm by which meaning is created. Thus, in Meschonnic’s framework, translators have an ethical obligation to respect rhymes, meter, and dialect, as they are part of what the words do. Anything that is replaced or explained — whether jokes, proper names, or cultural allusions — would signify a loss of the “how” of the poetic force and thus an instrumentailization of the poetic.

3.2 The hermeneutic approach (George Steiner)

George Steiner published the highly influential *After Babel* in 1975, presenting an interpretative approach to literary translation. Like Meschonnic, Steiner has a strong textual focus, bringing hermeneutic philosophy to actual translation practice. A difference between the two would be that while Meschonnic stresses the meaning-producing potential of poetic language (what the text does to the reader), Steiner’s focus is on the interpretative act of the translator (what the translator does to the text).

Building on ideas by thinkers as diverse as St Jerome, Schleiermacher, Hegel, and Heidegger, Steiner (1998, 312–319) envisions translation as a four-step hermeneutic motion. First, there is the translator’s initial trust, which is depicted as a belief that there is something in the text to be understood, something “worth translating” (Steiner 1998, 317). This first step is followed by aggression, alternatively referred to as violence, appropriative penetration, and rapture, through which the “translator invades, extracts and brings home” (Steiner 1998, 314); this is the step of understanding the source text. The third step, incorporation, is also described as sacramental intake, incarnation, and infection. Goodwin (2010), one of Steiner’s recent adherents, describes this phase as follows, in rather sexualized terms:

In Steiner’s imagery, the warrior returns home having captured the beautiful slave girl. He now has to make a place for her in his own world, where she will be a blessing and also a problem. Is the captive going to be dressed in the manner of her new home, or left in her own costume? To what extent is she to be taught the customs of her new home?

(32–33)
Steiner’s fourth and final step is restitution. It has to do with a balancing of the aggression and incorporation of steps two and three. To Steiner, an ethical translation in this fourth step directs the reader’s attention back to the original, restoring the balance.

Steiner does not oversimplify the translator’s responsibility to a simple either/or, that is a responsibility to either the author or the reader (or alternatively, to either the source text or the target text). His ethics involves accountability in both directions, towards the original author (in the first and fourth steps) and to the target culture (in the second and third steps). Goodwin (2010, 39) argues that Steiner’s model therefore offers a more complex ethics of translation than that of Venuti (see also Chapter 6 “Ethics in Berman and Meschonnic” and Chapter 10 “Venuti and the ethics of difference” in this volume, and the following section), which he dismisses as “single-issues ethics,” only concerned with strangeness and foreignizing strategies.

Steiner’s conceptualization of translation as a hermeneutic process holds value when it comes to understanding how translators work interpretively with texts. His meticulous description of this process also shows the complexity and pivotal role of understanding in any ethical translation practice. The idea is not to produce the one and only possible interpretation of the text, but to produce one which is defensible also upon closer scrutiny. The idea of translation as violence can moreover help visualize the process of translation as one that will inevitably change aspects of the source text. It may be claimed, however, that the aggressive and sexualized metaphors hamper rather than further Steiner’s and Goodwin’s arguments.

Though both Meschonnic and Steiner raise important ethical issues regarding literary translation, their respective frameworks are nevertheless of little practical help when a literary translator faces ethical questions such as those listed earlier. Mostly, this is because they are primarily text-oriented and do not consider the larger linguistic, literary, and cultural contexts in which literary translators operate. Such contexts were decisively drawn into the study of translation in the 1980s and 1990s by the scholars of Descriptive Translation Studies.

3.3 Descriptive translation studies (DTS)

Translation studies in its current form was largely formed by a network of scholars working on literary translation in the 1970s and onwards. Its leading practitioners founded some of the first book series and journals in the field, such as the Benjamins Translation Library and Target, as well as the academic association European Scholars for Translation Studies. The early works of these scholars belong variously to the so-called manipulation school (Lefevere [1985] 2014, 241; Hermans [1985] 2014, 11; Hermans [1999] 2020), DTS (Toury [1995] 2012; Hermans [1999] 2020) or the cultural turn (Lefevere and Bassnett 1990, 4; Snell-Hornby 2006, 47). Empirical studies of translations as well as of their literary and cultural contexts became the main focus of attention. In DTS, in particular, there was a strong focus on (descriptive) norms, that is on regularities of behaviour shared by a specific community of translators (Toury [1995] 2012; Chesterman [1997] 2016, 51–85).

The main contribution of DTS to translation ethics lies in how they widened the discussion on translation to include issues that go far beyond the relationship between source and target texts. DTS was concerned with finding out more about why texts change in translation and how translations impact their target contexts. In their own words, they offered an alternative to “painstaking comparisons between originals and translations” (Lefevere and Bassnett 1990, 4). Instead of making value judgments about translators’ solutions, defining whether they are “good” or “bad,” “right” or “wrong,” this tradition emphasizes the empirical research of translations in relation to their sociocultural contexts. The concept of manipulation was introduced to refer to how, from the target point of view, “all translation implies a degree of manipulation of
the source text for a certain purpose” (Hermans [1985] 2014, 11) and it was repeatedly underscored that “literary establishments manipulate originals” (Lefevere and Bassnett 1990, 13).

However, the reason these scholars called attention to translational manipulation in the first place was not to claim it was “unethical.” They did not judge translators; neither did they tell translators how to translate. Their ethical agenda was simply to find out and describe what was going on, since readers as well as translators were entitled to know how translations manipulate their originals. As a result, translations were to be studied in relation to the target culture rather than the source culture, and the supremacy of the source text was questioned. The explanations for why translations looked the way they looked were to be found in the target context and its ideological as well as poetic constraints. Thus, this group of scholars changed the focus from language to other constraints that they considered to be as important, if not more important, than the linguistic constraints. Lefevere [1985] 2014, 227–229; 1992, 9–19) introduced the concept of patronage to refer to those in power to tell translators what to do. Patrons may today be most easily identifiable with publishers, art councils, and the like who provide support for translation, but historically it may just as well have been a king or other well-situated person or institution (see also Chapter 21 “Ethics in the translation industry” in this volume). DTS, moreover, furthered the idea that some literary systems were more central than others were and that the role played by translation within national literary traditions often went completely unacknowledged by literary scholars. Although not using the term “visibility,” which was coined by Venuti a few years later, they advocated for the need to see the huge role played by translations in the literary and cultural sphere.

Instead of advocating a special ethics of translation, the ethics of Descriptive Translation Studies was research-oriented and consisted in (1) uncovering the mechanisms behind literary translation and (2) drawing attention to the influence of literary translations in national literary histories and cultures at large. In this perspective, translation could “introduce new concepts, new genres, new devices” but conversely also “repress innovation, distort and contain” (Bassnett and Lefevere 1992, preface).

Although DTS scholars did not delve into what ethical translation involves, they did explicitly aspire to make literary translators aware of the constraints they were working within. In the words of Lefevere (1992, 7), “A study of rewriting will not tell students what to do; it might show them ways of not allowing other people to tell them what to do.” Although he did not elaborate on this point, Lefevere here implicitly pinpoints a space in which translators are ethically responsible for what they do. In other words, although the work of translators is restricted by diverse constraints such as language, patronage, poetics, and ideology, this does not make translators unaccountable for their decisions.

DTS widened the field of literary translation studies to include cultural aspects and questions of power. The focus on power, ideology, and poetics laid the ground for many studies of censorship (e.g. Thomson-Wohlgemuth 2009; Pokorn 2012; Vandaele 2015). By highlighting the importance of cultural context, the influence of national literary systems on each other (e.g. Even-Zohar 1990), and also the many agents involved, it furthermore helped develop a sociology of translation.

The empirical studies of the manipulation school evidenced again and again that the work of the literary translator was far from neutral. Instead, translation was shown as implying a “rewriting” that creates “images” of the source text, the author, and the source culture, images that would always be at the service of someone (Lefevere 1992, 4). Ideological image-making, a phenomenon closely related to censorship, may today be most visible in children’s literature, since omissions of sexual, violent, and religious elements are quite common. Alfvén’s (2016) study of Swedish young adult literature translated into French in the early 2000s shows that although the
motif of “unprovoked violence” was considerably toned down in translation, it was nonetheless criticized by French reviewers as being unsuitable for young readers.

A less contemporary example would be the expurgation of religious elements from fairy tales in sociocultural contexts as ideologically diverse as Victorian Britain (Malmkjær 2003), socialist and post-socialist Slovenia (Pokorn 2012), and Francoist Spain (Martens 2016; see also discussion on censorship and translation of children’s literature in Alvstad 2018). Because of these bowdlerized versions, fairy tales thus seem inherently devoid of religiosity – and even today, long after such Victorian, Francoist, and socialist censorship, these fairy tales are still often published without the religious elements. This proves two points: first, that audiences may become attached to the versions they already know, so that familiarity becomes more important than “accuracy” (e.g. Bassnett and Lefevere 1992, 1–3, 13, about Proust’s grandmother reading *The Arabian Nights* in French); and second, that there is little or no awareness of how censorship has affected key literary texts in translation.

This second is borne out by Liljegren’s comparison of two translations into English of Strindberg’s *Giftas* (1884–1886), namely *Married* (1913) and *Getting Married* (1972). Although only the 1972 edition translates the work in full, it is still the 1913 translation – which omits certain passages about sex, procreation, and other naturalist ideas that were deemed unseemly in England at the time – that is the most frequently reprinted one, and the one marketed as the “Scholar’s Choice Edition” and “Primary Source Edition.” This may seem ironic since it omits the very naturalist traits that made Strindberg such a progressive and “dangerous” author, thus making it difficult to understand why he was so controversial (Liljegren 2018, 251–252). Choosing which translation to read, include in school or university curricula, or even reprint thus becomes an ethical issue, even if the people making the choice may be unaware that this is the case.

The contribution of DTS to translation studies is undeniable. Indeed, it has largely formed the discipline. Nevertheless, it ought to be noted that the field’s strong emphasis on descriptivism and its unwillingness – even opposition – to give advice to practising translators on how to handle either real translation dilemmas or the constraints of patrons, ideology, and poetics have clearly also hindered discussions of literary translation ethics. DTS does not discuss what is right and wrong to do under specific circumstances but has focused on the description of translators’ behaviour or, as in the work of Tourny ([1995] 2012), on the regularities of the behaviour of different translators, referred to as “norms,” while the values underlying the norms have been left out of the discussion. Hence, although DTS provides no prescriptive advice on the ethical advantages and disadvantages of different solutions, translators will find abundant information in its descriptive studies on how other translators have solved similar problems.

### 3.4 An ethics of difference (Lawrence Venuti)

The hitherto most influential ethical approach to literary translation is Venuti’s ethics of difference (see Chapter 10 “Venuti and the ethics of difference” in this volume). According to Venuti ([1995] 2018), literary translators in Anglo-American translation contexts generally produce fluent translations which domesticate all foreign elements. Drawing on the work of Berman and Schleiermacher (see Chapter 6 “Ethics in Berman and Meschonnic” in this volume), Venuti argues against domestication and in favour of foreignization for two reasons. First, if the text does not contribute anything foreign, its added value in the target culture is seen as very limited. Second, translators make themselves textually visible by using foreignizing strategies, which in turn will enhance their own visibility in society; this is important, because such visibility gives recognition to translators’ important work and strengthens their payment and intellectual rights to the translated texts. Translators looking for guidance on ethical issues will find plenty of discussions
in Venuti that argue in favour of foreignization as the ethically right choice. At the same time, it is important to be aware that the strategies suggested are formulated with reference to the Anglo-American translation context and that they may therefore not be universally applicable.

The most important difference between Venuti, on the one hand, and Meschonnic, Berman, and Steiner, on the other hand, is that Venuti – like DTS – addresses translation as both a textual and a societal matter, and not only a textual and literary one. This is crucial in regard to ethics, since the societal perspective brings in a totally different set of concerns to consider when evaluating the ethical outcomes of translators’ decision-making. Using Chesterman’s ([1997] 2016, 170) terminology, Venuti’s ethical approach can be described as a widening of the field from a micro-ethical approach, primarily concerned with the relationship between the translator and the text, to one that also includes macro-ethical matters, that is “broad social questions such as the role and rights of translators in society, conditions of work, financial rewards and the client’s profit motive.”

Venuti’s approach, as mentioned in section 3.2 on Steiner, is sometimes criticized for being a “single-issue” ethics (Goodwin 2010, 39, see earlier). This critique of Venuti reveals a rather narrow understanding of Venuti’s programme. Venuti promotes the foreign not only as an aesthetic value in itself but also as a potential cultural and sociological influence on the target culture, and in this sense his ethics is actually much more far-reaching than Goodwin’s.

### 3.5 The power of translation to reinforce and subvert hierarchies of power

In the 1990s, more or less at the same time as Venuti launched his highly influential ideas on the translator’s invisibility, two other major frameworks emerged that are concerned with the power of translators and the role of translations in society, namely postcolonial and feminist translation studies. Postcolonial translation studies draws attention to power inequalities between the Global South and the Global North, criticizing various kinds of exploitative translation practices (see Chapter 8 “The ethics of postcolonial translation” in this volume). Whereas a naive understanding would be that literary translation is intrinsically positive and always furthers cultural understanding, postcolonial scholars such as Carbonell Cortés (1995) conclude that if translators of oriental/exotic texts are unaware of the stereotypes about the source culture in the target culture, their translations could actually underpin such stereotypes rather than break them down. Carbonell Cortés (1998, 64–68) therefore argues, with reference to the work of Venuti ([1995] 2018), that what matters is not whether translators adopt foreignizing or domesticating strategies but that they inform their readers about their chosen stance:

> So, to conclude, the translator of oriental/exotic texts must above all be aware of the stereotypes and representations that make up his/her target culture, try to relocate one worldview into another in which different norms operate, lastly, be aware of the implications of his/her choices. Invisibility or defamiliarization will depend always on what the context of reception expects, and whether the translator chooses one or other strategy at any moment in any given text, the reader has the right to know what the translator’s approach in the source text has been.

(Carbonell Cortés 1998, 68)

Feminist translation studies have likewise shown how translations have reinforced gender stereotypes and silenced perspectives at odds with the target culture’s patriarchal conceptions of the world, for example by making strong female characters more subservient in the translation.
Many literary translators will conceive a need of remaining true to one’s own values. Feminist translation studies (as in the work by Simon 1996 and von Flotow 1997) and other activist approaches to translation have provided and theorized many examples of this and discussed whether sexist and paternalistic language and storylines should be changed in the target text or reproduced as is. Both strategies may be problematic for the activist translator. If emended, the sexism would be hidden and thus the source text author may come across as non-sexist, while merely reproducing the original would create a sexist translation and thus potentially reinforce sexist values in the target context, and furthermore do so in the name of the (feminist) translator (see also Chapter 9 “Feminist translation ethics” in this volume).

Like the work of Venuti, feminist and postcolonial approaches are sometimes taken to be single-issues ethics, concerned “only” with feminism or the legacy of colonialism. This is a reductive understanding of the implications of these approaches for translation and translation studies at large. The empirical data may be restricted to gender inequalities and the postcolonial legacy, but the theoretical implications are much broader since they evince the power literary translation holds to reinforce social injustice as well as to produce desired societal change.

### 3.6 A critique from translation sociology (Jean-Marc Gouanvic)

Gouanvic (2001) criticizes ethical approaches to literary translation that are only concerned with highbrow literature. Taking the work of Berman as a case in point, he argues with a comparison of two lowbrow genres in translation into French, where detective novels are translated with assimilative (domesticizing) strategies, while science fiction is translated with dissimilative (foreignizing) ones. One of the strategies cannot thus be claimed to be universally ethical whereas the other would be unethical.

The reasons for choosing one strategy or the other would not have to do with universal ethical values but with the conventions and the history of the two genres in French (Gouanvic 2001, 207). Instead of placing the questions of what is ethical and unethical at the level of the strategy chosen, Gouanvic (2001, 211) argues that the distinction ethical–unethical is related to the translator’s “intuitive analysis of the significance of the text to be translated.” In Gouanvic’s view, a translation that respects this significance is an ethical translation since it would allow for a “community of destinies” between the source and target texts. An unethical translation would be one which takes the target text elsewhere, making it serve other purposes, like when John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* was translated in occupied Belgium with omissions and changes that furthered Nazi interests (Gouanvic 2001, 209).

### 3.7 Complex translation situations: unstable originals

A “complex translation situation” refers here to a translation process that differs from a prototypical, linear translation of a single, well-defined source text. In actual translation situations, a translated text may in fact be based on or influenced by several texts, such as previous translations or different versions of the original text, including fragmentary manuscripts and critical editions. Such texts may influence the translation’s phrasing, its paratextual presentation, and indeed the very decision to translate the text.

Books that have been censored, adapted, or just revised by the author generally exist in several versions in the original language, printed in different places or at different points in time. Famous examples of books that exist in several versions in the source language because of censorship include Charles Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du mal* (Tenngart 2010) and D. H. Lawrence’s...
Lady Chatterley's Lover (Looby 2015, 123). Translations may be based on uncensored versions, censored versions, or a combination of different editions.

Nowadays, older texts that are perceived as racist and sexist are in many societies revised in newer editions in the original language, especially in children's literature. This will give rise to several versions of the “original.” Famous examples include books by Astrid Lindgren, Roald Dahl, and Mark Twain (Alvstad 2018, 162). For literary translators, publishers, and other agents, there may be arguments both in favour of and against basing the translation on the first edition rather than on a revised edition.

An argument for making such ideological changes to children’s literature is that society has changed and that the author would not have used those words today. Others would claim that the only way the translator can be loyal to the author is by being “loyal” to the child reader (Oittinen 2000, 6, 37, 76; see also Chapter 5 “Functional translation theories and ethics” in this volume). An argument used to support ideological changes of racist expressions is that children have not yet developed the frames of reference that would allow them to situate the “original” expression in its historical context (Alvstad 2018, 162).

### 3.8 Complex translation situations: retranslation

Another translation situation which complicates the linear idea of translation is retranslation. To understand why, as mentioned earlier, the heavily censored 1913 translation of Strindberg’s Gif	as is the one being circulated in the Anglophone world of today rather than the unexpurgated 1972 translation, we would need to understand both the mechanism of retranslation and the mechanisms behind the circulation of literary works. We will here concentrate on retranslation.

The actors and networks involved in retranslation are more or less the same as those involved in first translations – such as the author, the source text, the two interacting cultures, the publisher, the prospective readers, and so forth (Koskinen 2018, 319) – but with one major addition, namely the earlier translators. The fact that there is a predecessor whose works, and possibly also feelings, need to be taken into account changes what the new translator can and cannot do. Interestingly, a retranslation may be just as problematic if it strays too far away from the earlier translation as if it is too close to it: if too close, the retranslator may be accused of plagiarism or intellectual theft (Koskinen 2018, 320); if too far, the translator may have been too anxious of being influenced, for example of being accused of plagiarism or dishonesty (for discussions of “anxiety of influence” and retranslation, see Racz 2013; Koskinen and Paloposki 2015; Koskinen 2018, 320).

How can a retranslator handle these issues? An awareness of the legal and ethical issues in play is essential in such a situation, as they will help determine how ethically acceptable it is to recycle the work of a previous translator. Notably, the conception of intellectual ownership has changed immensely over time, not only for translations but also for works considered to be “original.” Much of what was considered original in early modern Europe would today be understood as plagiarism since the limits of imitation are perceived completely differently (see, for example, Bjornstad 2008).

Koskinen (2018), partially basing her argument on Racz (2013), asserts that various positions may all be ethically defensible and that the translator’s moral obligation to produce as good a text as possible justifies looking to earlier translations for inspiration or solutions. Nevertheless, the ethics of revising earlier translations – and the fuzzy line between revising and retranslating – complicates matters further: one of the questions that arises would be how much a reviser can change in the revised edition if the work is still to be regarded as the work of the first translator and not a retranslation.
3.9 Complex translation situations: indirect translation

A third kind of complex translation situation is that of a translation based on a translation into another language. This phenomenon is increasingly referred to as indirect translation (see Assis Rosa et al. 2017). Indirect translation has often been stigmatized, which from an ethical point of view is problematic, especially if it leads to non-translation or the indirectness not being explicitly accounted for on the title page (see Alvstad 2017, 152, for examples of overt and concealed information about indirectness). More openness around the phenomenon of indirect translation can lead to better strategies for overcoming problems connected to indirect translation, better training for prospective indirect translators, and so forth.

The influence of previous translations into other languages may begin already with the decision to translate a text. When the source or target language is not a central language such as English or French, the existence of previous translations into one of these languages makes it more likely that the work is selected for translation into for example Swedish or Turkish. Consecration of the work in the centre thus makes it more likely to be circulated also in literary peripheries (Casanova 2005). This is not only a question of the prestige associated with getting translated into English or French, but when a work from a peripheral language exists in a central language, it becomes linguistically available for publishers in the periphery, who then can make a more informed selection of the work they commission than if based solely on the advice of others.

A positive aspect of this phenomenon is precisely that when a book from a minor language/literature is available in English, it becomes available for translation via English into other minor languages, also when there are few or no literary translators available who could translate them directly, for example Tamil–Hungarian or Korean–Dutch. A negative aspect of the same phenomenon would be that some publishers might prefer to translate from such an English or French intermediary rather than from the original book even when there are translators available for the more unusual language pair. This phenomenon may be increasing: in a study of Chinese–Spanish literary translations translated between 1978 and 2012, Marín-Lacarta (2012, 3–6) located a change regarding directness and indirectness around the year 2000, that is the year when Gao Xingjian was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. Until that point, most translations had been made directly from Chinese on the initiative of the translator, while afterwards most of the translations were done indirectly after being commissioned by publishers who had based their selections on what was available in English and French. This sea change was not due to the sudden unavailability of Chinese–Spanish translators but rather to the publisher’s editorial decisions (see also Alvstad 2017, 152–153).

Indirect translation may be ethically dubious, as the very indirectness entails a filtering through a dominant culture. It is important to address the questions of what the consequences are and why such indirect translation happens in the first place, for example whether it is because publishers can then better “control” the translation process, save costs, or work with translators they are familiar with, or perhaps because of the rights situation or even their own personal preferences (given a presumed lack of awareness of how translation changes text).

In indirect translation, the translation may be based on a single text only or it may be based on several translations into the same or different languages and/or oral translations by informants who speak the languages of the original. To ensure greater accuracy, literary translators who translate indirectly sometimes collaborate with informants who speak the language in which the original was written (Alvstad 2017). Collaborating with speakers of the original languages, who know the original book well and who are well versed in the literary tradition in which it had come into being, could be a good strategy not only for dealing with inaccuracies but also for overcoming the risks associated with “the stereotypes and representations that make up
[the translator’s] target culture” that Carbonell Cortés (1998, 68) warns about when translating “oriental/exotic texts.”

Contrary to what one would assume, such collaboration with local informants does not guarantee non-stereotypical representations in the translated book. Analyzing a collection of books translated indirectly from various regional Indian languages into Swedish, Alvstad (2017) notes the strong exoticization of the Indian source cultures in the various books’ graphic design, forewords, blurbs, titles, and so forth, despite the close collaboration between the Swedish translators and local informants. India and its literature were, for example, repeatedly referred to with orientalist clichés such as “colourful” and “spicy,” and titles were likewise changed in this direction. Work of literary fiction, prose as well as poetry, were marketed as “windows to Indian diversity” rather than for their aesthetic values. This exoticization was later reproduced in newspaper reviews (Alvstad 2017, 157).

4 Emerging issues

A change may be perceived in recent empirically oriented research towards an ethical evaluation of translators’ decisions. Combining perspectives from Descriptive Translation Studies and ethnography, Sturge (2007, 5) notes, “the work of ethnography is a kind of translation.” She depicts translation as closely connected to representation, pointing out that the English word representation “combines the notion of portraying other people with that of speaking for them” (Sturge 2007, 2, emphasis original). Both understandings are put in play in translation, since translation claims “at once to ‘show’ others to the domestic audience and to speak the others’ words in the language of that audience” (Sturge 2007, 2).

Focusing on both these understandings, Sturge creates a framework which focuses on ethical perspectives precisely by pointing at negative aspects of translators’ output (most of the translators she analyzes, it ought to be mentioned, would self-identify as ethnographers rather than translators). She herself comments early on in the book that her comments at times “will seem only negative, following the hallowed tradition of translator bashing” (Sturge 2007, 4). Her reason for doing so, however, is neither to prescribe better solutions nor to find faults in the work of others, but to open a space in which ethical issues can be discussed.

Elsewhere, a recent article by Chesterman (2019) relates directly to the question of whether obvious errors should be corrected in later editions. In Chesterman’s example (2019, 667), a Finnish Shakespeare translator insisted on keeping obvious semantic errors in a new edition of one of his translations because “the text was ‘a whole’, and therefore individual details could not be tampered with at some later stage”; Chesterman himself found the argument “astonishing and thoroughly unethical, and the translator’s behavior absolutely unprofessional.” Whereas the Finnish translator seemingly considered his translation “a fixed text, as some sacred texts are regarded by some believers” (2019, 667), Chesterman persuasively argues that the translator should have emended it because such inaction “goes against the fidelity requirement mentioned in most codes of [translation] ethics.”

As a third example of the turn towards a more critical evaluation of literary translations, Deane-Cox (2017) analyzes the translation of autobiographical accounts of two French female prisoners in Nazi camps. Her analysis stresses the value of empathy and the responsibility of the translator towards Holocaust survivors. Both camp accounts are told with marked irony, a way of expression that survivors typically rely on “as both a means of communicating and coping” (Deane-Cox 2017, 105). This irony is only translated partially and is instead “neutralized” and “misappropriated,” leaving the reader with fewer clues for the interpretation of these passages (Deane-Cox 2017, 106). Deane-Cox (2017, 114) goes on to show how shifts between tenses, a
feature that in Holocaust testimonies “can serve to unsettle the narrative and point towards the abiding anguish of the survivor,” are similarly neutralized. There are also inaccuracies regarding numbers, as when the English translation states that the camp held 20,000 women, not 2,000 as in the French (2017, 125). Pinpointing such slips, and highlighting the underlying translation strategies that caused them, might prevent similar inaccuracies in transmission and thus improve future translations.

5 Conclusion

Literary translation will always be performative in the sense that it will take the texts somewhere else and mean something else than the source text did. As such, literary translation is reminiscent not only of other acts of literary writing but also of other acts of literary reading. Studies carried out over the last fifty years have enhanced our understanding of what translation does to texts, authors, and cultures. The widespread idea that literary translators should translate in a way that follows the source text as closely as possible – if that could indeed be defined – represents a rather naive understanding of what literary translation is and does. Descriptive Translation Studies was the first theoretical approach to unmask the naivety of the belief in the neutral translator and the idea of translation as “sameness.” It was not a framework that told translators how to translate, but underlying their observations was nonetheless a desire to make literary translators aware of the constraints they were working within.

Other frameworks have been more forthright in sharing their views on what is ethical and not. Venuti’s advocacy of foreignization and visibility has greatly influenced translation ethics, in part because Venuti’s approach highlights how translators, by deliberately choosing certain strategies to help change the target culture, can both promote intercultural understanding and improve their own status and remuneration. The subsequent criticism of these core ideas in Venuti’s framework have served to create an awareness of how inequalities of power must affect the strategies used. Feminist and postcolonial approaches have likewise been vital in uncovering structural differences and in showing how conscious and strategic translation might change the world as we know it.

Two major lines can be identified in recent research. One is to examine more complex translation situations such as retranslation and indirect translation. More texts and agents are involved in complex translations, which has brought ethics to the surface in very concrete ways. The other line is to examine translation choices made by translators in ethical perspectives, discussing how some ways of translating may be injurious to, for example, the author, the source text, or the source culture. These recent studies challenge the frameworks set up by Descriptive Translation Studies. At the same time, they are not prescriptive in the sense of, for example, Meschonnic or Venuti. Rather, they take steps towards a conceptual space in which ethics can be discussed. To whom are the translators responsible? How does the cultural context, power inequalities, and the poetics and content of the text affect the priorities that must be made?

Although translators might find some guidance on how to handle ethical dilemmas in the existent research literature, something seems to be missing. As of yet, there is no comprehensive ethical framework which can help translators evaluate the consequences of different solutions to various ethical dilemmas, such as the ones listed at the beginning of this chapter. In the light of this, it is encouraging that recent research on literary translation has begun discussing questions of representation, responsibility, and accountability. It may not be the role of researchers to provide concrete ethical guidelines to practising literary translators or translation students, but if the research community refuses to discuss the characteristics of good and bad practice, it is cutting its ties with the practitioners in the field.
In the recent critical evaluative approaches, exemplified earlier with the work of Sturge, Chesterman, and Deane-Cox, the virtues of “attention” and “empathy” stand out as being especially important. Translators who translate both the surface level of the text and its deeper levels, with attention to and empathy for the text as well as for the people and the cultures involved, are likely to translate in a more ethical way. At the same time, translators who foster these virtues will also further them in themselves, thus contributing to their own ethical growth. Obviously, translation researchers, just like translators, need to approach the texts, people, and cultures we study with attention and empathy and cultivate these virtues. Thus, the field of literary translation ethics can be developed into a field that is neither purely descriptive nor purely prescriptive, but value-oriented.

Related topics in this volume

Ethics in Berman and Meschonnic; the ethics of linguistic hospitality and untranslatability in Derrida and Ricœur; the ethics of postcolonial translation; feminist translation ethics; Venuti and the ethics of difference; ethics of collaboration and control in literary translation.

References

Looby, Robert. 2015. Censorship, Translation and English Language Fiction in People’s Poland. Leiden: Brill. DOI: 10.1163/9789004293069
Further reading


This article is a critical evaluation of three translations of a contemporary Latin American novel. It discusses ethical consequences of the translators’ simplifications, normalizations, and explicitations. It is argued that Herrera’s novel, with the help of literary devices such as neologisms, questions stereotypical ways of representing the two central themes of the novel – migration and multilingualism. The three translations flout the literary devices of the source text, producing texts that give priority to (stereotypical) anthropological representation over aesthetic values. As a consequence, both the text and the author come across as less innovative in translation.


A study of the paratexts of various English translations of the West African Mande oral epic Sunjata. It compares the visibility given to the Malian djeli (the oral storyteller) in the different English translations. Referring to Venuti’s concept of “visibility,” Batchelor notes that the translatedness of the text and the Western translator is highly visible, and that the high “visibility” of the Western translator is “likely to reproduce and reinforce global power inequalities,” since the djeli, collaborators in Africa who helped produce the translation and the collective ownership of the epos, is practically invisible in most of the translations.


Recent and comprehensive overview of ethics in relation to literary translation. It takes a broader perspective than does the present chapter since it does not primarily focus on ethics in relation to the literary “translator” but also focuses on ethical dilemmas for publishers (selection, editing, marketing, and the terms of contracts), reviewers, and teachers of translated literature.