The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Ethics

Kaisa Koskinen, Nike K. Pokorn

Ethics of activist translation and interpreting

Publication details
Julie Boéri, Carmen Delgado Luchner
Published online on: 17 Dec 2020

How to cite: Julie Boéri, Carmen Delgado Luchner. 17 Dec 2020, Ethics of activist translation and interpreting from: The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Ethics Routledge
Accessed on: 04 Aug 2023

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms
This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
1 Introduction

“Activist translation and interpreting” encompasses a variety of communication practices across languages, cultures and modalities, whose aim is to support political agendas and struggles at both the local and the global level. Within this context, a wide array of translation actors – translators, interpreters, subtitlers, dubbers, with or without a professional background – “identify with and contribute to concrete political agendas, particularly through volunteer work,” and “participate in collective action to bring about social change” (Boéri 2008, 22), be it within relatively stable activist communities (Babels, ECOS, Tlaxcala, etc.) or in temporary, transient networks (Cuaderno del Campo, Mosireen, Voices of Women from the Egyptian Revolution). Although activist translation (as a broad encompassing term for all its modalities) shares some of the characteristics of volunteer or non-professional translation (see Chapter 16 “Ethics of volunteering in translation and interpreting” in this volume), its explicit political motivation singles it out, given the ethical issues arising in activist circles.

Politically motivated and performed by actors with varying trajectories and backgrounds, activist translation is situated at the crossroads between two social fields (activism and translation) with their own set of norms and values (doxa in Bourdieu’s terms) (Bourdieu 1994; Thomson 2012). However, these fields are not homogenous nor do they have clear boundaries. Indeed, the norms and values influencing the practice of translation are shaped primarily by both the language industry and the academic (inter-)discipline of translation studies, while the norms and values of activism arise within a liminal and contentious space between social movements, civil society, (inter-)state institutions and, increasingly, digital culture. The intersection of activism and translation gives rise to an even more complex environment, characterised by a high degree of uncertainty (Inghilleri 2005), as regards which doxa should prevail (Delgado Luchner and Kherbiche 2019). This intersection configures a space characterised by hybridity, uncertainty and contentiousness, where ethical issues, and even dilemmas, are bound to arise.

Since exploring these ethical issues constitutes the raison d’être and the aim of this chapter, it is at this very intersection between translation1 and political activism that our critical engagement with ethics is situated. This will allow us to account for the complexity and
heterogeneity of the activist communities, spaces and practices in question and to examine the ways in which principles and values are constructed, contested and renewed in this dynamic and disputed space.

2 Historical trajectory: activist translation and interpreting

Adopting a very broad perspective, one could consider every act of translation as inherently ideologically motivated, either at the macro-level with regards to the choice of content to be translated (Schäffner 2003) or at the micro-level of the translation process, for instance the decision to domesticate or foreignise the original text (Venuti 1995). One of the challenges of sketching out a history of activist translation and interpreting therefore rests upon its very definition.

We define activist translation and interpreting as practices that are specifically set out “to connect across the globe and to bring about social and political change” (Boéri 2019, 1) and to disrupt dominant discourses and institutions, in the same way that activist movements have “agendas that explicitly challenge the dominant narratives of the time” (Baker 2006, 462), i.e. as practices that are intentionally and explicitly geared towards social change and a disruption of existing power structures. In this light, feminist (see Chapter 9 “Feminist translation ethics” in this volume), humanitarian (Delgado Luchner and Kherbiche 2018, 2019) or developmental (Delgado Luchner 2018) translation may sometimes overlap with activism, depending on the articulation of ends and means.

For instance, some humanitarian organisations, and by extension their translators, may pursue an activist agenda. However, the ethical principles that guide humanitarian work emphasise the impartiality of aid organisations (Labbé and Daudin 2016) and the provision of aid to alleviate immediate needs (van Arsdale and Nockerts 2008) rather than pushing an agenda for social change. Similarly, development aid is generally provided without disrupting the world order, and formerly alternative discourses (e.g. participatory or grassroots development) have become co-opted into the mainstream (Escobar 1995), thereby losing their activist dimension. Another aspect which contributes to delimiting activism is individual actors’ identification and engagement with the agendas of the institutions, organisations, networks and communities they work for. For instance, humanitarian work may resemble activism given its purposes, but translators in this context unlike those involved in social movements (Baker 2006; Boéri 2008) may not self-identify as activists nor even identify with the aims of the humanitarian organisation employing them (for a discussion on refugees working as interpreters for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Kenya, see Delgado Luchner and Kherbiche 2018).

Conversely, the scope of activist translation can be extended to practices that may not bear this label. Indeed, activist translation, despite its emergence as a field of enquiry in translation studies in the 21st century, is not a new phenomenon. Historical examples include Luther’s endeavour to translate the Bible into German with a view to subverting existing ecclesiastic power structures (Baker 2014, 417), as well as Irish nationalists’ translations under British colonial rule (Tymoczko 2000a). There are many other examples cutting across time and space, although they may not have been described as activist in the literature. The three seminal edited volumes which have explicitly addressed activism in translation studies (Boéri and Maier 2010; Simon 2005; Tymoczko 2010) cover a wide array of translation practices throughout history that aimed to redress power imbalances, support minorities and resist domination, dictatorship or censorship.

This continuity between the scholarship on visibility and intervention (which had come to the fore in the 1990s) and the emerging literature on activism at the turn of the century has led
Gambier to dismiss “activism” as little more than a new term arising in the wake of globalisation to reiterate the old call for language diversity (see Gambier 2007). However, as argued by Boéri (2019), the research on activism differs in ways that allow us to speak of an emerging field of enquiry. It places the emphasis on practices situated outside of the translation industry, for instance in civil society and social movements (Baker 2006, 2013, 2016a; Boéri 2008, 2012b), uprisings (Baker 2016b) and, increasingly, in information and communication technology (ICT)-mediated activist communities (Baker 2019; Boéri 2014b; Pérez-González 2010, 2016), where translators and interpreters are more likely to have the agency to address systemic injustices. It has also initially disregarded individual, textual interventions in order to explore collective action and discourse beyond the micro-context of the mediated communication encounter, although the increased technologisation of social life has tended to blur the line between texts and contexts as well as individuals and communities. Scholars adopting an activist approach have sometimes supported activist causes, while at the same time aiming to remain critical and reflexive about the tensions and contradictions underpinning activism. The work of scholars involved in ECOS, Babels, the Palestinian cause or the Egyptian revolution are cases in point that illustrate a new trend of politically engaged research in translation and interpreting studies (see Boéri 2016, 2019).

These trends in activist translation and interpreting scholarship have brought this research area closer to that of contemporary social movements studies. Present-day social movements have their roots in struggles of the 1960s and the 1970s, such as the labour movement, the civil rights movement and the women’s liberation movement (Maeckelbergh 2009). However, while these were associated with two important changes, namely the emergence of the market and the creation of the modern nation-state, “new” social movements have shifted from a focus on individual states towards supranational issues such as the fight against “neoliberal globalization” (Della Porta and Diani 2006, 46) and from a “command-oriented logic” (typical of traditional, bureaucratic and hierarchical organisational models) to a “networking logic” (typical of grass-roots groups) (Juris 2005, 256–257).

The global justice movement is a case in point: it encompasses a set of “initiatives against neoliberal globalization [that] are very heterogeneous, and not necessarily connected to each other,” and whose actions have taken “a myriad of forms, from individual utterances of dissent and individual behavior to mass collective events, and from a variety of points of view” (Della Porta and Diani 2006, 2). The global justice movement or alter-globalisation movement constitutes one of the most thoroughly researched contexts for activist translation (Baker 2013, 2016b, 2019; Boéri 2008, 2010, 2012b). Activist translation practices in this constantly evolving movement – often framed as a movement of movements, best captured by the French word mouvance – constitute the kind of “anti-establishment initiatives” that Baker sees as addressing “specific issues that exceed national and social boundaries” (Baker 2018, 453). However, it would be reductive to limit activist translation and interpreting to exclusively political communities and initiatives since translators’ mobilisation in and beyond this movement take multiple forms such as “social activism, cultural activism, art activism and aesthetic activism” (Baker 2018, 453) or language activism (Koskinen and Kuusi 2017).

The very purpose of activism is to defend specific values and principles associated with social change (for instance “participation,” “deliberation” and “horizontality” as outlined in Boéri 2012b) and to usher in alternatives that embody these. Therefore, its practice and its study imply ethical motives and have ethical consequences. Groups with diametrically opposed agendas may consider themselves as “activist,” as evidenced in the example of pro-Israel activist groups, such as the American Zionist organization, and pro-Palestinian activist groups who both “refer to themselves and are referred to by others as activists” (Baker 2019, 453).
The legitimacy of one form of activism or another is a matter of perspective not only for the groups undertaking it but also for the researchers analysing it. The use of different terms to label change-oriented action – “radical activism” or even “terrorism” (Moskalenko and McCauley 2009), or “advocacy” (Keck and Sikkink 1998), to name but a few – may have to do with the perspective of the researchers and the tradition of their discipline, as regards the groups under analysis. For instance, social movements studies has been traditionally interested in movements that are positioned on the left of the political spectrum (Benford and Snow 2000), despite the fact that anti-globalisation movements exist at either end of this spectrum. It is worth noting that the left/right vocabulary may be problematic because alter-globalisation groups tend to eschew the vocabulary of mainstream politics, although, as Della Porta and Diani remind us, the “majority of those who still regard the left-right distinction as meaningful identify with the left of the political spectrum” (2006, 71).

Translation studies scholars have also primarily focused on groups closely associated with the so-called new or international left which has emerged after the collapse of the USSR and the spread of neoliberalism, even though there may well be translation activist projects on the other side of the spectrum. This trend is likely to be due to translation scholars’ general commitment to linguistic and cultural diversity and pluralism (Baker 2016a, 10) that they are likely to find within these groups by difference with their right-wing, fundamentalist or terrorist counterparts in the fight against globalisation. Scholars have also tended to focus on groups with global agendas rather than “nationalist aspirations” or “religious belief” (Baker 2013, 24; see Hokkanen 2012 on activist church interpreting, as an exception in this regard) and to explore activist translation, performed on a volunteer basis (Boéri 2019) or within a radical, grassroots and revolutionary ethos (Boéri 2008). In this strand of research, the dynamics of co-optation by the capitalist market and by the service economy and the interplay between dominance and resistance have been part and parcel of the analysis (Baker 2006, 2018; Boéri 2012b; Piróth and Baker 2019).

This brief historiography of activism in translation studies and social movements studies sheds light onto the disparate territory configured by activist practices of translation and their theorisations. Its contours may be renegotiated according to the definition of activism adopted by researchers, their interest in and/or subscription to an ethics of inclusion or exclusion, of homogeneity or diversity, an ethos of solidarity, humanitarianism, revolution, the resort to violence and armed struggle, and the level of critical engagement with the practices, actors and spaces under analysis.

3 Core issues and topics: ethics of positionality and organisation

Activist translation and interpreting practices have given rise to ethical controversies within activist, professional and academic circles. Tensions have particularly crystallised around two issues, the positionality of translators and interpreters and the organisation of translation and interpreting. As we shall see, they have been approached from two different, if not opposed, perspectives: impartiality versus engagement and expertise versus grassroots knowledge.

3.1 Ethics of positionality: impartiality versus engagement

We understand positionality in the sense employed by Delgado Luchner and Kherbiche (2018), i.e. as shaped concurrently by an individual’s agency, their personal background, their relationships with others and a wider social and political context. In this light, positionality goes beyond “positioning” as employed by Mason (2009), since it includes the wider socio-political context individuals are embedded in and the conditions and constraints that shape power asymmetries.
Thus, “positionality” is a critical concept for addressing translators’ and interpreters’ dynamic position and relation to the values and principles of our societies.

The ethical principles most commonly mentioned in professional codes of practice and taught in training settings revolve around core stakes: accuracy, neutrality and confidentiality (see Chapter 20 “Ethics codes for interpreters and translators” in this volume). Among these three principles, it is by far that of neutrality (also linked to impartiality) that has been most challenged over the last decades, first by post-structuralists who relegated neutrality to a mere epistemological ploy, and then in the 1990s by translation researchers who questioned the traditional “conduit model” of inter-linguistic translation (Baker 2005; Tymoczko 2006; Venuti 1995).

Criticisms of this model have also emanated from studies of dialogue interpreting, where the physical proximity of the interpreter with third parties imposes a tangible limit on invisibility and impartiality (Angelelli 2004; Tipton 2008; Wadensjö 1998), and interpreting for the military (Baker 2010; Inghilleri 2010). In view of these developments, impartiality has ceased to be viewed as an accurate description of the translator’s actual positionality (Baker and Maier 2011; Delgado Luchner and Kherbiche 2019; Drugan and Tipton 2017). However, this development in research has had a limited impact on professional organisations (and educational settings), which still largely subscribe to impartiality and neutrality as inherently good (Boéri 2015; van Wyke 2010).

It was at the turn of the 21st century, with the emergence of activist communities of translators and interpreters, that the “ethos of neutrality and non-engagement” (Baker and Maier 2011, 3) was to be more openly questioned (van Wyke 2010). Babels, the international network of volunteer translators and interpreters (Boëri 2008, 2010, 2012b; Lampropoulou 2010), Tlaxcala (Baker 2013; Talens 2010) or ECOS, the association of translators and interpreters for solidarity (Baker 2013; Boëri 2010; De Manuel Jerez, López Cortés, and Brander de la Iglesia 2004; Sánchez Balsalobre García, Manuel Jerez, and Gutiérrez 2010) and Translator Brigades (Baker 2013), to name but a few, became new players in the field of translation. Alongside these communities of “activist translators,” communities of “activists who translate” (Guo 2008) were created mostly by actors with no background in translation or interpreting, namely Gush Shalom (Baker 2006), Cuaderno del campo (Baker 2019; Pérez-González 2010), or Mosireen, an Egyptian collective of citizen journalists and cultural activists (Baker 2016b).

All these communities have adopted a discourse of engagement and partisanship and put this discourse into practice in highly visible settings, such as international social forums and digital environments. This discourse is at odds with a profession that has traditionally been developed, taught, theorised and learnt within an ethos of impartiality. Even within collectives which involve an important number of professionals, and teachers or students of translation and interpreting like ECOS, Babels or Translator Brigades, engagement seems to take precedence over neutrality and impartiality. Such a radical political profile was bound to spark conflict within professional circles. Tensions became public after the World Social Forum in 2005, when conference interpreter Peter Naumann published a letter against Babels (the network in charge of volunteer interpreting in this event), in Communicate!, the webzine of AIIC (the French acronym for the International Association of Conference Interpreters). His satiric portrayal of Babels’ members as “ideologues of militancy” (Naumann 2005, n.d.), for instance, is an unveiled criticism of engagement at the elite end of the conference interpreting profession (see Boéri 2008).

However much at odds with the profession, it is the very blending of translation and activism, and the hybridity of actors as both translators and activists, which is characteristic of activist settings: translation becomes an activist endeavour and activism, in its attempt to build networks of solidarity across the globe, becomes a translated collective action.

By getting involved in specific communities and agendas, by selecting and translating “missing narratives,” translators and interpreters play a major role in boosting public opinion
attention and curtailing the state repressive power on specific communities. This is for instance evidenced by the involvement of Translate for Justice since 2013 “in making suppressed news and documentation about violations of human rights in Turkey available at a global level” (Baker 2019, 455).

This has a direct bearing on the ethics of positionality, as reported by Samah Selim, award-winning Arabic translator, scholar and volunteer activist subtitler for Mosireen during the Egyptian revolution:

This type of translation is not and cannot be “neutral”, and I mean this both in the broader ethical – or what I would prefer to call, political – sense, and in the pragmatic of “professional” sense. In times of revolutionary crisis, the dissident translator is a partisan, fully present in non-textual actuality, in place.

(Selim 2016, 82; emphasis original)

Activist settings, particularly revolutionary ones, configure a space where being involved means finding one’s “place,” “being-in-place”; a positionality that is dynamically constructed in and through translation, for and by fighting injustices. Selim’s emphasis on the “political,” rather than the “ethical,” shows how limiting the doxa of our field has been for an ethics of engagement. Selim’s account shows that where and when the two fields of the profession and political activism intersect, impartiality and neutrality are often overridden by political engagement.

3.2 Ethics of organisation: expertise versus grassroots knowledge

The tension over the positionality of the translator/interpreter is coupled with a tension over the organisation of translation and interpreting in activist settings. Activism in contemporary social movements is guided by several overarching principles, such as horizontality and participation (Boéri 2008, 31), diversity and pluralism (Baker 2016a, 10), advocacy and listening (Mosko 2018, 326) and a quest for social justice (Della Porta and Diani 2006, 68). Even though they do not provide clear “prescriptions for acting,” they illuminate “a moral posture” (Mosko 2018, 331) and shape the organisational principles of activist communities. For instance, both the Social Forum and Babels, in their charter of principles, adhere to horizontality (in the sense that they are both self-conceived as open spaces for people to freely and equally contribute with no hierarchies in the organisation), participation (that is, the direct involvement of participants in the organisation, as opposed to representation whereby mandated organisers take decisions on behalf of others) and prefiguration (the belief that activism in the here and now should embody the desired social transformation) (see Boéri 2012b). They believe that these principles have the potential to create a space for pluralism, diversity, inclusion and grassroots knowledge (Boéri 2010, 65).

The experience of the Social Forum reveals an important development in contemporary politics, namely that “ideology is increasingly expressed through organizational practice and design as opposed to discourse” (Juris 2005, 258). It thus follows that studying the ethics of engagement requires examining the organisational culture of activist translators and interpreters, and the extent to which it corresponds to that of the profession.

Diversity and inclusion have been at the heart of the field of translation and interpreting, but it is through the ethos of expertise (quality, working conditions, competences) that they have been championed, sometimes creating the illusion that interpreting as a technical skill has universal features that are unconstrained by a specific cultural context (Delgado Luchner 2019). By contrast, Babels, like many other groups emerging outside of the profession, did not (at least
initially) show “any engagement . . . with issues of quality, nor working conditions” (Boéri 2010, 66), since requirements to join the group were very loose. Such a stance challenges the very foundations of the profession, as it implies that speaking foreign languages is sufficient in order to translate and interpret. However, professionalisation rests upon the development of a profile of expert, rather than “natural,” “ad hoc,” “novice” translators and interpreters (see Boéri 2012a). It is thus not surprising that the shift in discourse (the emphasis on political engagement rather than competence) and in practice (actual involvement of non-professional volunteers) has sparked controversy in professional circles.

This is particularly the case in the field of conference interpreting, where services provided for free by untrained bilinguals, interpreting students or recent interpreting graduates are perceived as a threat to professional standards, as made explicit by Naumann’s (2005, n.d.) reference to Babels as “the innocents, the dilettantes, the semi-professionals, the perfect fools and an army of the well-intentioned [who] will again join the travelling circus and stage the next fiasco.” The propensity of professional conference interpreters and their associations to speak out publicly against activist and non-professional practices may also have to do with the volte-face brought about by activism in a profession which has traditionally serviced the interests of the first world (Cronin 2002) and which boasts the image of a “strongly eurocentrist, elitist professional caste” (Gentile, Ozolins, and Vasilakakos 1996, 8, in Martin 2016, 231).

Furthermore, unlike other modalities of translation, activist interpreting practices enjoy a high degree of visibility: Babels interpreters have been involved and seen in social forums across the world, and their calls for volunteers are widely circulated across the globe. The visibility of these initiatives can backfire given their uneven efficacy: interpreters’ booth planning sheets have been described as hanging on “washing lines,” working conditions as “chaotic” (Cathy Arnaud interviewed in Boéri and Hodkinson 2005), and Babels volunteers’ translation output as “hazardeuse” (“arbitrary”) (Agrikoliansky 2007, 37; our translation from French). Interestingly, the lack of efficacy is perceived differently at the two ends of the spectrum: as a decline by the elite end of the profession (particularly AIIC), for whom interpreting services ought to be provided by expert, remunerated professionals in the market economy (Boéri 2015); and as part and parcel of the process of experimenting alternatives to neoliberalism for activists, which requires inclusion of the grassroots from the bottom up (Boéri 2010). These two stances take the ethics of organisation in two different directions – expertise in the market economy versus grassroots experimentation in a new world under construction – and this has a direct bearing on translation planning and language diversity. For instance, in their attempt to step out of the market economy, activist communities question the law of supply and demand of languages and champion the coverage of non-colonial languages or languages that are not used as an international lingua franca, in order to allow all activists to contribute to political debates in the language of their choice. This is particularly the case of Babels, whose identity as a political actor rather than as a service provider shapes its interpreting and language policy in the Social Forum:

In addition to the unavoidable vehicular languages, Babels proposes the languages of the location where the Forum takes place: Hindi and Marathi at the Mumbai WSF [World Social Forum] in 2004, Quechua at the Quito Americas Social Forum in 2004, Catalan at the Barcelona Mediterranean Social Forum in 2005, Greek at the Athens ESF [European Social Forum] in 2006, Swedish at the Malmö ESF in 2008, British Sign Language (BSL) at the London ESF in 2004 and Brazilian Sign Language (Libras) at the Porto Alegre WSF in 2005, and Arabic at the Tunis WSF in 2013. Added to this are languages that are deemed strategic for the extension of forums into under-represented regions: languages of India (Telugu, Bengali, Malayalam) and of Asia (Korean, Indonesian, Japanese and Thai) in
Mumbai, Mediterranean, Central and Eastern European languages in London, Barcelona and Athens.

(Boéri 2013, 9; our translation from French)

Thus, by difference with many ad hoc translation and interpreting settings, engagement in activist settings is not a mere “side-effect” of power asymmetries or a lack of professional training. It results from social actors’ deliberate choice to use translation, interpreting, subtitling, and dubbing as “means of engaging in political activism” (El Tarzi 2016, 92) and, more importantly, of transforming our societies towards greater justice. In such a process, translation may also become an empowering space of self-expression for engaged citizens and artists (Mohamed 2016; Strowe 2017), in a wide array of digital and non-digital settings.

Nevertheless, however much activist communities strive for an alternative ethics of organisation, they cannot fully escape logistical constraints, particularly the lack of training in minoritised languages. Therefore, there is a constant tension between the ideal of diversity and its implementation, between organising translation and interpreting from a bottom-up perspective (attending to the needs of the grassroots, and shaping the direction of social transformation by their inclusion) and from a top-down perspective (resorting to formally trained translators and interpreters in the major international lingua francas) (Boéri 2012b).

To strike a balance between the two approaches, activists might experiment with diversity called for by many activist communities of translators and interpreters. And indeed, in spite of an apparent clash between the doxa of activism and the doxa of the profession, the emergence of activist practices of translation and interpreting have also opened a space for reflection and for pushing the boundaries of each field towards the other.

4 Current debates and issues: revisiting ethics

The ethical principles and praxis emerging at the intersection of translation and activism are heterogeneous. They are embedded in the power asymmetries of this intersectional space, and consequently some of them may have more currency and recognition (ethics doxa) than others have, which are shared only by a minority of marginal actors in the field (ethics heterodoxa).

4.1 Ethics doxa: impartiality and expertise in volunteer services

As already discussed, activist translation and interpreting tend to challenge the ethical principles of impartiality and expertise. However, a critical examination of what is meant by engagement may lead us to reconsider the apparent incompatibility of these principles with activism, at least within certain activist circles. Indeed, activist communities of translators and interpreters rarely refer to engagement as a form of intervention in the text, which is one of the key distinctions between translation in the context of social movements (what we consider activist translation) and feminist translation, where intervention in the text has tended to take centre stage. Instead, they frame engagement in the very choice to translate and interpret for a particular cause. Even in Babels which, in the first decade of the century, was recognised as one of the most politised communities of translators and interpreters (Baker 2006), intervention in the organisational and interpreting policy of the event (Boéri 2012b) has taken precedence over textual intervention in the booth (Boéri 2008; Baker 2018).

The professional background of some of the actors involved may be influential given their usual concern for textual integrity, regardless of their ideological positioning (Tymoczko 2007). As noted by Boéri (2019), “it is by way of stepping out of subservient role they [translators and
Ethics of activist T&I

interpreters] are assigned within the communication encounter itself that they might find some leeway to adopt a political stance” (4).

Nevertheless, research shows that translators and interpreters do intervene in and beyond the text, through intentional omission, addition or alteration of elements (Tymoczko 2000b; Kassiem 2017), choice of content to be translated (Schäffner 2003), choice of language (Martin 2016), paratextual interventions (Baker 2007), and so on. In fact, intervention – both at the micro-level of the text and at the macro-level beyond the text – has been at the heart of scholarly accounts of free, ethnodeviant, foreignising and resistant strategies of translation and interpreting, be they displayed within elitist circles such as the French Canadian feminist translators (von Flotow 1997) or within grassroots contexts such as the case of immigrants acting as brokers between the Indignados and the Occupy Wall Street movements (Romanos 2016).

Nevertheless, actors who organise and provide translation and interpreting services in volunteer, activist circles might be more concerned with the logistics of getting the message across than with accounting for the complexities and the granularity of translation engagement. As “beneficiaries” of interpreting, they may be unaware of the fact that an interpreter is more than a mere conduit and view activist interpreters as they would view any other language services provider (i.e. impartial and qualified), with the only difference that they support their political cause through volunteering their time and skills. Thus, even in activist circles, there may be an assumption that translation and interpreting activism revolves around merely providing impartial and expert (however free) services. This assumption is in some cases shared by the individuals acting as translators and interpreters, whether they are trained or untrained, paid or volunteering their time, as has been observed in the case of an advocacy organisation, Amnesty International (Tesseur 2017). In these cases, the traditional view of translators as neutral, impartial and expert is reconciled with an ethics of engagement that starts and ends with the choice of the cause to support, with no intervention in the realm of the text and the message. Thus, at the core of the intersectional space between political activism and translation, the professional doxa of impartiality and the activist doxa of communicational and organisational efficiency shape an ethics of selfless service provision based on expertise and solidarity. One of the risks of this “ethics doxa” is that volunteering may be instrumentalised by commercial agendas which are concealed behind a non-profit organisation. A case in point is that of Translators Without Borders, which functions as an offshoot and a selling point of a commercial translation agency (Baker 2006) and as the “philanthropic arm of a massive business consortium” (Piráth and Baker 2019).

Professionals who are reluctant to see interpreting services provided for free might view these scenarios as evidence that volunteering is only about economic savings, and thus unethical. For translators and interpreters who identify primarily as activists and derive their motivation from this positionality, these scenarios might be alienating. Indeed, as observed by Baker (2016a, 11), who draws on Boéri (2008), there exists

a persistent tension between the volunteers’ conceptualization of their role – as primarily political activists . . . – and the conceptualization of that role by non-translators in the movement, who often seem unable to think of translators as anything other than service providers positioned outside the main struggle.

Nevertheless, both conceptualisations may well be championed by translators and non-translators alike. Those positioned within traditional organisational politics (NGOs, humanitarian organisations, etc.), are more likely to subscribe to a service provision ethics, whereas those positioned in “new” social movements, with grassroots politics of organisation, are more likely to adopt a political stance on translation (Boéri 2012b). In any case, even radical social movements
struggle to resist the pattern of efficiency because of the pressure to deliver macro-events, like the social forums, or the urgency to get the message across in violent, high-risk activism processes such as the Egyptian uprising (Baker 2019).

In the case of the social forum, the logistical pressure is coupled with the dominance of traditional groups over the organisational process because of inequality of resources (Boéri and Hodkinson 2005). The subsequent reproduction of the ethics of selflessness, solidarity, impartiality and expertise in a space that, according to the Charter of Principles of Porto Alegre, was to embody alternative organisational politics has led Babels to withdraw from the Social Forums process at several points in time, and definitively, it seems, in 2015.

From 2015 onwards, volunteer interpreting at the Social Forums has no longer been provided by Babels. In a 2015 press release, the collective underlines,

[T]he last of prior participatory consultation with our collective on the political or logistical issues that we consider should be jointly and collectively defined, including diversity of languages to be covered by interpretation, and dates and content of training sessions.

(www.babels.org/spip.php?article566)

Even though the press release ended on a somewhat conciliatory note, pledging support to the organisers “through other means,” the 2016 WSF in Montréal seems to mark a split which does not seem to have been overcome at the time of writing this chapter, given that this document was the last to be posted on the Babels website. The Babels coordination for the 2016 edition of the World Social Forum provides the following reasons for the network’s withdrawal: the Organising Committee’s decision to “only offer interpreting into three colonial languages,” thereby running the risk of silencing “a number of grassroots indigenous voices as well as voices from the Global South,” the provision of interpreting services and equipment “for large conferences only,” due mainly to the absence of a “meaningful provision for a solidarity fund for interpreting”; the impossibility of guaranteeing “the right of everyone to express themselves in the language of their choice and to contribute to discussions on the part language plays in the mechanisms of cultural domination and in the circulation of ideas,” the organising committee’s decision to launch “an interpreter pre-selection process without the involvement or knowledge of the Babels coordination team” and the lack of clarity surrounding working conditions for volunteer interpreters (including reimbursement of expenses for travel, food and lodging, as well as available interpreting equipment). In other words, Babels coordinators felt that their involvement was to be relegated to a mere free service and that they were not given the leeway to shape the politics of language and interpreting at the Social Forum.

These withdrawals are indicative of the difficulty, if not failure, to challenge the ethics of solidarity, impartiality and expertise in service provision and indicate that this service provision ethics currently constitutes the ethics doxa of the intersectional space between political activism and translation. In this light, scholars may have to turn their attention to the alternative ethical principles and practices relegated to the margins, so as to explore the ethics heterodoxa and its potential for a renewed ethics of translation and interpreting.

4.2 Ethics heterodoxa: intervention and prefiguration

The Social Forum experience, one of the most documented cases of activist translation in the field, has shown the logistical and political difficulties of developing alternatives to the service economy and to the belief that societal development rests upon greater progress, championed
by experts rising above their own ideological biases. These alternatives are thus pushed away by mainstream approaches to socio-political change (doxa), towards the margins of the intersectional space between translation and political activism (heterodoxa). Despite their peripheral positioning and their imperfect implementations on the ground, these alternatives take ethics to uncharted territories where scholars and professionals alike may find inspiring principles and practices of translation and interpreting to contribute to social justice.

The value of diversity has been constitutive of the collective identity and action of the movement for global justice, since it is considered “an act of resistance to the homogenization of 500 years of colonial history, contemporary democracy, the mass media and consumerism” (Maeckelbergh 2007, 92). This mass-based movement which cuts across time, space and struggles – including the 1960s’ women’s, civil rights and peace movements (Polletta 1998), the alter-globalisation movement in the 1990s, the World Social Forum at the turn of the century and the more locally rooted upsurges that have arisen this decade (the Arab Spring, the Occupy and Square movements, etc.) – “stands against the unitary narratives of (neo-)colonialism, progress and expertise and advocates for social change as diverse, multilayered, undefined and under construction” (Boéri 2020). It is thus constitutive of an alternative approach to knowledge and power whereby translation and interpreting may take on a new meaning (Boéri 2010) both at the micro-level and at the macro-level (e.g. in and beyond the communication encounter).

Activist movements take the view that if structures of oppression are to be overcome, their communication practices ought to be inclusive of difference, in such a way that translation and interpreting become constitutive of social justice. The conflation of means and ends of social change and the attempt to enact “the values of an ideal society within the very means of struggle for that society,” which are defining features of prefigurative politics according to Maeckelbergh (2007, 43), is also championed by communities of activist translators and interpreters. This is attested to by the fact that these communities spend a considerable amount of time discussing their scope of involvement not only to avoid dumping but also to resist the co-optation of volunteering by commercial agendas (Sánchez Balsalobre et al. 2010 for ECOS; Boéri 2014b for Babels).

Challenging the commodification of all aspects of life and work and structures of cultural oppression might not be achievable without translators’ and interpreters’ intervention within the texts, at the micro-level of communication. Despite a lack of explicit engagement with activist translators’ and interpreters’ interventions at this level, as underlined earlier, communities develop initiatives to prepare volunteers for the tasks awaiting them in the realm of mediation. For instance, ECOS and Babels have developed the situational preparation materials that aim to test volunteers’ technical skills and background knowledge (Boéri 2010, 67).

Quality is acknowledged as a necessary requirement if the actual process of translating is to embody social change and justice, since the translation provision serves the purpose of allowing everyone to partake in the debate and have their voice heard. However, quality is reframed within a narrative of grassroots and critical knowledge, away from expertise and impartiality (Boéri 2014a). This approach is very much in line with the “self-reflexive” nature of contemporary social movements and their often lauded high “internal ability for critique, analysis, and the distribution of perspectives” (Lewis 2012, 229). In this context, issues such as accuracy, quality and working conditions have gradually emerged as important ethical concerns.

In this light, prefiguration (the principle of embodying the change one wants to see) appears as a key concept for a renewed ethics of translation and interpreting, not only at the macro-level (Boéri 2012b) but also at the micro-level, for example in subtitling practices (Baker 2019). In this sense, Baker’s use of prefigurative politics to account for subtitlers’ “commitment to solidarity, diversity, non-hierarchy, horizontality, non-representational modes of practice” (460) can
be extended to translation and interpreting at large. “Prefigurative translation and interpreting,” thus, refers to these interventionist practices in the texts, the discourses, subtitles, sound tracks or any other semiotic elements such as images and their paratexts, which bring to light the act of mediation both at the micro- and the macro-levels, across cultures, languages, channels and modalities in cultural, political and artistic activism, e.g. in making a film, in organising with and for movements or in performing expressive political actions.

It is not surprising that it is in audiovisual translation studies that prefiguration at the micro-level was first addressed to account for activist interventions, since as argued by Pérez González (2014, 255–256), this area of practice is a “site of interventionist practice” through the replacement of subtitles, the exploitation of the visual in order to communicate alternative messages, the use of sarcasm, the subversion of conventions. These practices embody the trends of interlinguistic, multimodal and intercultural communication in social movements which include the increased mediation of technologies, the increased disregard for authorship, a sense of urgency to get the message across (particularly in high-risk activism), the blurring of the frontier between aesthetic and political activism given the similarities between contemporary mobilisations and fan cultures, the blurring of the frontier between individual and collective initiatives, and the shift from formalised (fan) communities to ad hoc, temporary community building, i.e. “adhocracies” (Pérez González 2014).

Exploring translation and interpreting practices through the lenses of prefiguration allows scholars to explore how means and ends can be conflated in the very mode of doing translation. For instance, with reference to subtitling revolutionary materials in the Egyptian uprising, Baker (2019) underlines that not attending to register variation, code-switching, coherence when translating at the micro-level of activist texts contradicts the agenda of empowering the peoples and the communities “represented” in these audiovisual materials and neglects the empowering potential of language and translation. The choice of languages (Boéri 2012b; Martin 2016), technical and technological tools (Baker 2019; Boéri 2012b), and the causes to support at the macro-level also deserves some reflection on the part of decision makers. For instance, Babels has always strived to raise awareness among Social Forum organisers of the contradiction between the political aim to involve the grassroots organisations (ends) and opting for colonial languages only in their interpreting policy (means) which ultimately reinforces language and cultural barriers. Similarly, resorting to patented soundproof booths from private monopolistic companies contradicts the agenda of providing an alternative to capitalism in the Social Forum (Boéri 2013).

Such a reconciliation of practices from both levels can equip scholars to account for the complexities and the granularity of activism in translation and interpreting. Prefiguration can become a yardstick for scholars and practitioners to assess translators’ and interpreters’ interventions in and beyond the realm of mediation, or to put it in another way, to assess the extent to which their interventions embody the values of diversity, inclusion and social justice. The assessment of these heterodox and marginal practices, however, need to take into account their limitations in terms of lack of resources and time, as well as their difficulties to resist co-optation in that “liminal” space between the world of activism and the service economy” (Baker 2013, 23).

5 Conclusions

Research into activist translation and interpreting practices overlaps with a growing body of research into non-professional, volunteer practices that are not performed or organised according to professional standards. However, researching activism is distinct from researching these unconventional practices in the sense that the former is claimed to be undertaken for bringing
about social change. The emergence of activist communities and ad hoc temporary communities (ad-hocracies) of translators and interpreters on the ground, their political stance on translation as an act of engagement to be organised from the bottom up, have disrupted the professional standards of impartial and expert services provision. Nevertheless, the complexities of ethics cannot be accounted for by drawing on professional versus activist, engaged versus impartial, expert versus grassroots dichotomies, as actors who are involved in the liminal space between political activism and translation/interpreting are heterogeneous, even hybrid, their participation is unstable, and their principles and practices are constantly evolving. Activism does not escape from the interplay between dominance and resistance, between principles and practices, politics and logistics, and is configured around power asymmetries. The diversity and contentious nature of the ethical principles and praxis developed in activist contexts configure ethics doxa, at their core, and ethics heterodoxa at their margins. The former stabilises an ethics of impartial, expert service provision within a view of volunteer activist translation as a mere act of solidarity and selflessness. The latter champions an ethics of agency and intervention in ways that prefigure the social justice advocated for. Using prefiguration as a yardstick to explore activist translation and interpreting both at the macro-level and at the micro-level of communication promises to renew ethics in translation and social movement studies.

**Related topics in this volume**

Translator ethics; professional translator ethics; conference interpreter ethics; the ethics of public service interpreting; ethics of volunteering in translation and interpreting; feminist translation ethics.

**Note**

1. Throughout this chapter, we will use the term “translation” to refer to both (audiovisual) translation and interpreting, and the term “interpreting” when referring to interpreting only.

**References**


Further reading


In addition to academic contributions, this edited volume features texts written by activists involved in translating the Egyptian Revolution, and provides readers with unique perspectives which push the boundaries of our field and its traditional understanding of ethics.

This paper offers a contrastive analysis of the ethical principles guiding Babels volunteers and professional conference interpreters, and thus illustrates the two sets of doxa presented in this chapter.


This entry is dedicated to research into activism within translation studies, thus encompassing its various strands of research such as (audiovisual) translation and interpreting.


In this monograph, the authors present the historical roots and key features of contemporary social movements. As such, it allows translation studies scholars with an interest in activist translation to better understand the context within which this practice is embedded.


This collection of papers covers a broad range of examples of activist translation practices distributed across time and space. Although not explicitly focusing on ethics, the chapters in this volume enrich our understanding of the history of activist translation.