The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Ethics

Kaisa Koskinen, Nike K. Pokorn

Functional translation theories and ethics

Publication details
Gernot Hebenstreit
Published online on: 17 Dec 2020

How to cite :- Gernot Hebenstreit. 17 Dec 2020, Functional translation theories and ethics 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

According to functionalist approaches, the translator makes decisions about the communicative goals of a given translation and about which methods to apply in order to achieve these goals. These decisions can be based solely neither on elements found in the source text nor on knowledge pertaining to the source and target languages and cultures. Rather, they need to take into consideration the interests and needs of the translator’s “partners” in the communicative act. Such decisions are likely to have an impact on others and thus raise ethical issues. The aim of this chapter is to discuss the ways in which these issues have been discussed by functionalist translation scholars and to illustrate the development from the formal rejection of ethics in the 1980s to an active advocacy of functionalist translation ethics in the new millennium. The chapter will first provide a short overview of the central ideas and concepts of Hans J. Vermeer’s *skopos theory* and Justa Holz-Mänttäri’s *theory of translational action* and then trace ethical issues in the two authors’ works. This will be followed by an overview of the discussion on the necessity of ethical boundaries in relation to the eligibility of translation skopoi and an analysis of the concept of *loyalty* as introduced and elaborated by Christiane Nord. The chapter will close with an account of Erich Prunč’s attempt to conceptualize translation ethics within the functionalist paradigm in the context of *translation cultures*.

For this chapter, “translation” means “translation and interpreting” and “TS” is short for “translation and interpreting studies.” This clarification seems necessary insofar as the central works of functionalist translation theory have been published in German, where “Translation” denotes a concept generic to “translating” and “interpreting,” and the theories discussed here claim to be of a general nature, i.e. comprising all kinds of translational action.

2 Historical trajectory

Within TS, the terms “functional theories” or “functional approaches” refer to a school of thought that draws on general theories of human action to explain translation as a purposeful activity; as a product serving a specific purpose; and as interaction between a group of actors cooperating to the ends of that purpose. Thus, a translation is produced to serve a *purpose*, or to
fulfil a specific *function*. It is that very function that forms the core of “functionalist” approaches to translation. “Functionalists” distinguish themselves clearly from “linguistic” approaches that try to explain translations as the result of operations that take place on various linguistic levels (sign, sentence, text), which are intended to lead to “equivalence” between a “source text” and a “target text.” Such positions can be found in the works of Otto Kade, Albrecht Neubert, Werner Koller, Jean-Paul Vinay and Jean Dalbernet, John Catford, Juliane House, Peter Newmark, and to some extent in the work of Eugene Nida and Katharina Reiß. According to linguistic approaches, the source text is considered the determining factor in translation, and all answers on how to translate should be found in the source text and in knowledge pertaining to languages and textual conventions. “Functionalists,” on the other side, maintain that the main determining factor of a translation is its purpose, or the function it is intended to fulfil in a target culture. Such a perspective implies that the translator is no longer seen as a mere “de- and re-coder of words between languages, but has wider responsibilities” (Kalina 2012, 97). The two functionalist theories with the greatest impact on the development of TS are Vermeer’s skopos theory and Holz-Mänttäri’s theory of translational action. The two theories were developed almost simultaneously in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the former in Germany, the latter in Finland. In 1984 the two scholars published comprehensive monographs presenting their theories (Reiß and Vermeer 1984; Holz-Mänttäri 1984).

For functionalists, translation is a kind of human action. Action is distinguished from other forms of human activity or behaviour by its intentionality: actions are performed in order to attain a specific goal. The term “skopos” (a Greek word for “aim,” “target,” “goal,” “purpose” cf. Vermeer 1996, 4) refers to the purpose of the translational action that is initiated by someone in need of a translation (commissioner, initiator, or client). Vermeer postulates that, as in any other action, the steps you take, the way you act, the means you employ etc. are determined by the intended goal, i.e. by the skopos of the translational action (Reiß and Vermeer 1984, 95). With regard to the way of acting (such as translation strategies, or decisions about how to handle the source text in its content and linguistic form), *adequacy* is key: the translator strives to produce a translation that is “adequate,” i.e. fit to serve the intended skopos (139). This skopos does not necessarily comply with the original skopos of the source text (103). In fact, Vermeer and Holz-Mänttäri both agree that, when comparing the purposes of source texts and their translations, a difference in purpose tends to be the norm rather than an exception from the rule (Vermeer 1990, 115; Holz-Mänttäri 1990). One reason for this can be found in the differences between the source culture, from which the text originates, and the target culture, where the translation is received. In order to produce an adequate translation, these differences need to be taken into account. In skopos theory, the source text is seen as an “offer of information,” which the translator uses to produce the translation as an “offer of information” in a target language, to a target culture (Reiß and Vermeer 1984, 76). Vermeer describes the relationship between source and target texts as *intertextual coherence*. The nature of this coherence, i.e. the degree of similarity in form and content is, just like every other aspect, determined by the translation’s skopos (114). Consequently, a translation’s equivalence to its source text, which was the central demand according to linguistic approaches, is now regarded as one of many possible skopoi in skopos theory. This reduction of the status of the source text is often referred to as “dethronement of the original.”

In her theory of translational action, Holz-Mänttäri (1993) takes this dethronement one step further. Here, *translational action* is understood as *transcultural text design*, where the “Design–Text,” i.e. a text that is tailor-made for a specific purpose in a specific situation or context, can differ greatly from the source text (Holz-Mänttäri 1984, 120–121) and does not necessarily need to be linked to a source text at all, if the translator, as the expert in transcultural communication,
decides so. It is important to note that translational action can go beyond the translation itself: translation is a kind of translational action involving a source text (Vermeer 1990, 71). Thus Vermeer's skopos theory can be seen as a special type of theory of translational action, whereas Holz-Mänttäri's theory is more general. Holz-Mänttäri (1984) stresses the translator’s role as an expert collaborating with other experts in order to achieve a common actional goal (120–121). Translational action is seen as part of a superordinate complex of actions (“Handlungsgefüge”) and in service of the overall goals of this complex (43–44). It is worth noting that, in this complex of actions, the translator does not only collaborate with a commissioner. Rather, Holz-Mänttäri presents an elaborate model of roles in translational action. She distinguishes the initiator or client who needs the “Design-Text,” the commissioner who orders it, the author of the source text, the translator, the person “applying” the text in the target situation and culture (“Zieltextapplikator”), and the recipient (109). As an expert for transcultural text design, the translator analyzes the communicative conditions in the target situation, consults the action partners with regard to the specifications of the text design, and produces it according to these specifications.

3 Core issues and topics

3.1 Tracing ethical issues in Vermeer’s work

It might seem paradoxical to look for an ethical stance within the context of skopos theory, given the criticism it had to face for ignoring ethical issues, or for being unethical altogether (Kopp 2012, 145), and given Vermeer’s own explicit statements concerning the inclusion of ethics in his theory (see later). Nevertheless, in her analysis of Vermeer’s understanding of responsibility, Kopp (2012) concludes “that skopos theory has an ethical foundation and that it is only apparently in conflict with ethics” (161–162). While I do not fully concur with Kopp, I would like to demonstrate in the following section that Vermeer was not totally blind to the question of ethics.

Vermeer (1996) repeatedly argued against the inclusion of ethics in general theories of translation: “ethics must not be mixed up with general theoretical considerations about other subjects. The same applies to value discussions. Science should be value-free (wertfrei).” He continues that, if ethics were included, it would be unclear “how to formulate a general ethical theory of translating which would not be prescriptive” (107–108). So part of Vermeer’s rejection of ethics is based on his requirement that a theory must not be prescriptive. This might be surprising, considering that skopos theory has often been seen as a prescriptive theory (cf. e.g. Kohlmayer 1988, 148). There is no denying the prescriptive undertone in many of Vermeer’s publications, especially in relation to the examples he provides, and most certainly in the context of translator training, where skopos theory was applied as a set of rules to be followed in order to produce adequate translations, with Vermeer leading a fierce battle against established paradigms (cf. Nord 2010). However, despite the terminology used (“skopos rule”), the core of skopos theory can indeed be interpreted as a set of descriptive postulates.

Vermeer seems to map ethics to the individual rather than to a group or society: “Morality and/or ethics (whichever terminology one prefers) are phenomena concerning personal behaviour” (Vermeer 1996, 83, and in a similar vein Vermeer 2009, 5), and he also speaks of “(interindividual) morality and (personal) ethics” (1996, 22). Modelling such individual, context-specific aspects might appear problematic in the framework of a general theory. More important, though, seems Vermeer’s (2009) observation that ethics is culture-specific (6). If ethics were to be included in a theory of translation, such a theory could never act as a general theory of translation, which ought inherently to be independent of specific cultural contexts.
Vermeer does not refer to any specific literature on ethics, but it seems clear that here he is talking about normative ethics.

Setting aside these theoretical considerations, one cannot avoid the impression that Vermeer had strong reservations about, and possibly even mistrust in, the field of ethics. At one point, for example, he expresses his concern about the “deceptive powers” of individuals acting as ethical role models and warns that people might all too readily avoid taking difficult decisions themselves and blame ethics instead (Vermeer 2006, 68–69). He also used the provocative rhetorical question, “Ethik, gibt’s das denn?” (“Ethics, does that actually exist?”) as the title of a presentation in which he spoke of an “egological” ethics and argues that all of us follow our own ethics (2009). Yet Vermeer’s writing is nonetheless not completely free of ethical dimensions.

Ethics is implicitly present in the concepts of freedom and responsibility, which Vermeer uses quite often. Vermeer (1990, 89) sees freedom of choice as an essential characteristic of the concept of action. He also claims that the integration of responsibility is a major conceptual innovation that skopos theory brought into the realm of TS: acknowledging the role of the skopos goes hand in hand with acknowledging the translator’s responsibility for the production of a functional translation. Vermeer sees the translator’s responsibility as the very core of skopos theory and explicitly relates it to the translator’s ethos (Vermeer 1990, 130–131). In Vermeer’s thinking, freedom and responsibility are closely interrelated. The translator has the same freedom in wording the translation as the author has in wording the source text (Vermeer 1996, 77–78). The limits of the responsible use of that freedom are set by the skopos of the translation (Vermeer [2001] 2007, 188). In this context, Vermeer highlights the importance of an “ethically honest” mindset. It is also interesting that the level of visibility of the translator (i.e. the translator’s authorship) can be seen as an indication of the level of appreciation for the translator’s responsibility (Vermeer 2006, 254–255).

In her analysis of Vermeer’s understanding of responsibility, Kopp (2012) shows that this concept has a double orientation: one that is retrospective (accountability for the product and its functionality) and one that is prospective, pointing towards possible consequences that extend beyond the mere act of translating (157). Vermeer exemplifies such consequences in his discussion of the potential implications of texts pertaining to rearmament or ecological problems and explains, “Although I am not supposed to give you moral advice, I still want to draw your attention to the cultural implications of the translator’s and interpreter’s work” (Vermeer 1994, 10). Such cultural implications are also evident in what Vermeer calls the social task of the translator, which has several dimensions: first, the responsibility to “[collaborate] in the communicative act in such a way as to promote the achievement of the skopos” (11); second, the “cultural responsibility to introduce into a society and its literary tradition new aspects either of form or of content or of meaning and thereby new aspects of the ‘world’, thus enriching (‘erweitern’) the target culture” (13). The translator’s social task also comprises a responsibility for the ethics of the profession: this concerns the translator’s choice for or against accepting a given commission, the definition working conditions, pecuniary compensation, and – on a truly social level – the translators’ reputation and social position in society (Vermeer [1990] 2007b, 17). For Vermeer, one central aspect of ethics in relation to the profession is that the translators should identify themselves with the profession to the greatest possible extent, i.e. taking on the specific role that translation involves and requires (2006, 353).

Vermeer’s concept of culture is interesting from an ethical point of view, as he conceptualizes it as a system of norms:

Culture is whatever one has to know, master or feel in order to judge whether or not a particular form of behaviour shown by members of a community in their various roles
conforms to general expectations, and in order to behave in this community in accordance with general expectations unless one is prepared to bear the consequences of unaccepted behaviour.

(translation by Nord 2018, 32)

In Vermeer's own summary, “Culture may be understood as the whole of norms and conventions governing social behaviour and its results” (Vermeer [1990] 2007a, 20); culture is thus “the repertoire of rules regulating behaviour, including linguistic behaviour ... or ... the repertoire for good interpersonal behaviour [Gutverhalten]” (Vermeer 2009, 2–3, my translation). Thus ethics is conceived of as sub-inventory of rules for good individual behaviour. Being a subsystem of culture, ethics must therefore be culture-specific. Vermeer understands culture as a relative concept (cf. e.g. Vermeer 1996, 3): culture can relate to individuals (“idio-cultures”), groups (“dia-cultures”), and societies (“para-cultures”). According to Vermeer (2009), there are infinitely many cultures and ethics and “ethics and cultural behaviour belong together, however not in a 1:1-relation” (5, my translation). Thus, according to Vermeer, a specific culture does not predetermine a specific kind of ethics.

3.2 Tracing ethical issues in Holz-Mänttäri’s work

Holz-Mänttäri hardly makes any direct reference to ethics. I only came across the word “ethisch” once in the context of professionality. Unlike Vermeer, Holz-Mänttäri does not oppose the inclusion of ethics in a theory. The most striking characteristic of her model is an underlying egalitarian worldview, ascribing total equality to all the roles involved in the translation process. Hönig (1992) points out that Holz-Mänttäri’s focus on cooperation is based on her assumption of a horizontally structured society that is constructed according to the division of labour. He raises doubts about the empirical realism of such an assumption: “In my own observations, all I can see is a vertically structured, hierarchized society. And this brings us to the question of power” (3, my translation), and, one might be inclined to add, “to the question of ethics.” Holz-Mänttäri (1993) rejects the criticism with an argument that is comparable to Vermeer’s position: her model, she states, does not try to depict reality but to model “variables and their relationships as a system that is compatible with the organic and mental human conditions [mit den organischen und mentalen Gegebenheiten des Menschen kompatibel]” (304, my translation). However, she points out that a theory should, amongst other requirements, provide a basis for discourse pertaining to the responsibility and/or accountability (“Verantwortlichkeit”) of the translator (Holz-Mänttäri 1994, 348).

When it comes to the translator’s responsibility, Holz-Mänttäri (1984) sometimes uses the word “Verantwortlichkeit,” which morphemically translates as “responsibleness.” Depending on the linguistic context, the word “Verantwortlichkeit” can be used as a synonym for (the much more frequent) “Verantwortung” (responsibility). However, a closer look at specific contexts in the work of Holz-Mänttäri reveals two more “technical” meanings of Verantwortlichkeit that seem to predominate: on the one hand responsibility in relation to the division of labour, in the sense of “whose job it is,” and on the other, responsibility in the sense of answerability, accountability, or justifiability. There are several instances where Holz-Mänttäri maintains that the translational action needs to be “verantwortbar” (94, 98); here it is clear that the meaning is without doubt “justifiable.” In a similar context, the notion of “verantwortliches Handeln” (“responsible action”) is disambiguated in the same way as “justifiable action” (97). The noun “Verantwortlichkeit,” however, tends to be used in contexts that identify responsibilities in the sense of “who is responsible for what part of the job?” in a shared working environment with
several cooperating partners. This is most evident in cases where the plural form (“Verantwortlichkeiten”) is used: “Each role requires abilities and each role is linked to rights and duties, and thus responsibilities” (40–41, my translation). With these observations in mind, it seems likely that, when she talks about what is to be expected from a theory, Holz-Mänttäri’s use of responsibility is intended in this narrower sense.

According to Holz-Mänttäri (1984) the translator has to analyze the “functional field” of the target text, i.e. the context for which it is intended, evaluate the findings, draw the necessary conclusions, and make decisions or prepare decisions that need to be made by a partner fulfilling another role (109). Like Vermeer, Holz-Mänttäri maintains that the translator’s role is that of an expert or a professional. For Holz-Mänttäri, professionality is characterized by the social authorization to take on particular responsibilities (Holz-Mänttäri 1988, 47) and by the ability to work responsibly, i.e. to ensure that decisions are justifiable in relation to their intended function. The ability to work responsibly in such a way distinguishes professionals from non-professionals (Holz-Mänttäri 1994, 352). According to Holz-Mänttäri (1984), the key to justifiable action and justifiable products is diligent, systematic work throughout the whole process, where each step is based on sound decisions (98). This is necessary because translators do not communicate on their own behalf, but on behalf of other people who play other communicative roles in a given actional cooperation (Holz-Mänttäri 1988, 46). Here, implicitly, yet clearly, the translator’s responsibility is understood in a wider, non-technical, sense.

A further key concept implicitly linked to ethics in Holz-Mänttäri’s model of translational action is cooperation. She argues that all the partners need to cooperate in order to achieve an actional goal. A central responsibility of the translator in this cooperation is to inform and consult the cooperating partners with regard to the translational action (Holz-Mänttäri 1984, 118), to negotiate an unambiguous description of the product, and to ensure adequate working conditions (114–115), whereby this last condition is the shared responsibility of all participants in the action.

3.3 Skopos unlimited? The issue of loyalty

Kopp (2012) points out that skopos theory has often been characterized as an “anything-goes-theory of translation,” and its assertion that, in translation, the end justifies the means was deemed “unethical sui generis as it accords a disputable power to the translator” (Kopp, 145). For some critics, even seeking a skopos would equate “to a disputable arbitrariness of translation that would allow the translator to do anything he wants” (154). An inherent danger of the functionalist approach is visible in the inherent potential for “misuse” (Kadric and Kaindl 1997, 144–145), such as the possibility to promote an ideology in the target text that was clearly not intended by the author of the source text. Within functionalism in TS, this line of critique has led to the development of the concept of the translator’s loyalty, as introduced by Nord (1989).

Loyalty is an ethical category, introduced explicitly as a “corrective measure vis-à-vis a reckless functionalism” (Nord 2004, 236, my translation). Unlike the old concept of fidelity, which refers to an intertextual relationship, loyalty refers to an interpersonal relationship (Nord 2003, 94). It is “a moral principle indispensable in the relationships between human beings who are partners in a communication process” (Nord 1991, 94).

Who, then, are the translator’s partners in a given action? According to Nord (1989, 102), there is a commissioner, a target text recipient, and a source text author. Being loyal means respecting the partners’ interests. The commissioner’s interest is to obtain a translation that serves the intended purpose (skopos), the source text author’s interest is not to be interpreted in contradiction to his/her own intentions, and the recipients’ interest is to receive a translation that fits their
expectations, or—as Nord also calls them in one of her publications—their “subjective theories” (Nord 2001, 195) about translation.

Such expectations always pertain to the relationship between the source text and translation. In her critique of skopos theory, Nord (1989) proceeds from the observation that the nature of this relationship, which she refers to as a “link” (“Anbindung”), is dependent on the intended skopos (102). As such, it will vary according to the different skopoi. This means that, with regard to specific elements in the source text, the translator will confront different options and requirements to retain or change certain elements in the process of producing the target text. As for the possible nature of the skopos, it is evident that it needs to be “justifiable,” to “make sense”—in German: “begründbar (‘sinnvoll’)” (Reiß and Vermeer 1984, 101). Other than that, Nord (1989) sees no restrictions in skopos theory concerning the range of possible purposes. If, Nord argues, with a given skopos, no link can be established between the source text and the translation, either because that would be impossible or not permissible, then the translation cannot take place. Nord concludes that in order to be legitimate, the skopos must be “compatible” with the source text. Compatibility rules, she adds, are culture-specific, and, in “our” (probably German or “Western”) culture, this would entail that a translation must not contradict the intentions of the author of the source text (102).

Expectations pertaining to translation are based on culture-specific translational conventions. Nord (1991) understands conventions as a type of social regularity. Conventions differ in terms of their normative force and the possible consequences of non-compliance with rules (at the top of the hierarchic structure) and norms (located in the space between rules and conventions). Conventions draw their normative force from the fact that they have proven themselves as a successful means of problem-solving. Consequently, conventional behaviour is behaviour that everybody (in a given group) follows, everybody expects of everybody else, and everybody prefers adhering to (95–97). Translational conventions lead to specific expectations concerning the relationship between the translation and the original (e.g. “fidelity), or the relationship between the translation and its purpose (e.g. “functionality”), or the reception of the translated text (e.g. the impression of “foreignness”). Translational conventions are not universal, but valid only for an individual culture at a given time (92). Thus, the “decision on what may or may not be a ‘possible’ or a ‘legitimate’ translation skopos for a particular source text is based on the conventional concept of translation regarded as valid in the cultures involved” (94). A practical problem arises from the fact that translational conventions are usually tacit, often vague, and sometimes even contradictory (100, 107). Therefore, Nord calls for more research in this field.

The translator has to take these translational conventions into consideration. This does not mean that the translator must always do what everybody expects: “Loyalty may require precisely non-observance of certain conventions. But in any case, the translator should at least inform the other participants of what has been done, and why” (Nord 1991, 95). Nord sees loyalty as a responsibility that puts a limit on the “range of the translation purposes allowed for in relation to one particular source text”: if a commission entails the risk of disloyalty to the other partners, the translator should address the problem, negotiate with the client, or “perhaps even refuse to produce the translation on ethical grounds” (Nord 2001, 200).

Based on what has been said so far, it is hardly surprising that Vermeer (1996) rejected the proposal of including the concept of loyalty in his theoretical framework: the general theory “cannot contain restrictions to the possible variety of skopoi.” However, he does concede, “each culture will have its own restrictions” (87). Such restrictions, he says, are part of the prevailing circumstances surrounding the production of translation. Vermeer views conditions like “loyalty” or the “source text author’s intention” as “obstacles” which can prevent the production of a fully optimal result (with regard to the intended skopos as defined by the commissioner):
“Loyalty” is then a term for such an ‘obstacle’, but no concept ‘in its own right’. And from a point of view of general theory it seems to acquire a preponderantly negative connotation” (100). In a later publication, Vermeer (2006) points out that the translator’s position in relation to his action partners is not a given, and that the translator does not necessarily always side with the commissioner. Still, Vermeer maintains that the skopos of the interaction will provide the necessary guidance to find concrete solutions (352). There is one kind of loyalty that Vermeer mentions in a positive way, which is the translator’s loyalty to the profession: “[I] think, the translator should be loyal to his own professional role demands only (and as a person to his ethical convictions)” (Vermeer 1996, 86, cf. Vermeer 2006, 353).

While Vermeer (1996, 81–100) questions the validity of Nord’s conceptualization of the source text author’s intention, he does not argue against the idea of translational conventions, which are actually very much in line with his own conceptualization of culture. Again, he argues that a general theory should not include culture-specific conditions. This appears somewhat inconsistent with the fact that, following skopos theory, a translator should take target culture-specific conditions of the target audience into account in order to produce a translation that functions in the recipient culture. It is also doubtful if one can conceive of action in the Vermeerian sense as something taking place in a cultural vacuum. Perhaps, then, it would make sense to integrate this thought into the modelling of translation (as such) on a general theoretical level. One could argue that Vermeer’s refusal to integrate translational conventions on the level of general theory can be attributed to his personal reservations about ethics as such (see earlier).

In any case, other TS scholars argue that translational conventions should be seen as part of the skopos (Flynn 2004, 282). However, such integration does not imply that there are no possible skopoi that go against certain given translational conventions.

As mentioned earlier, Nord (2004) sees loyalty as an ethical responsibility of the translator. In short, it is the translator’s responsibility not to knowingly betray any of the action partners (236), whilst at the same time producing a functional translation. This is summarized in the formula “function plus loyalty,” replacing Vermeer’s “skopos rule” as the new guideline for translators (Nord 2003). For Nord, the translator’s responsibility evolves from the fact that his/her partners are not in a position to judge whether the translation complies with the requirement of functionality or whether it is sufficiently linked to the source text. They need to rely on the translator fulfilling the task in good conscience (Nord 1989, 102). Since the translators are the only partners with knowledge of both cultures, they carry the responsibility for all parties involved, including themselves (cf. Prunč’s position on loyalty, later) (Nord 2004, 236).

In Nord (2004, 237), the author describes loyalty with reference to (Chesterman 2001) as an “ethics of conflict prevention, trust, professionalism, and truthfulness” (“Ethik der Konfliktprävention, der Vertrauens, der Professionalität und der Wahrhaftigkeit”). Whereas the integration of “translational conventions” was an important step forward in the discussion on loyalty, this new approach appears to be less convincing. Chesterman’s article is explicitly anchored in value theory and virtue ethics (see also Chapter 2 “Virtue ethics in translation” in this volume), and for Chesterman, the central values are clarity, truth, trust, and understanding, with related virtues such as fairness, truthfulness, trustworthiness, empathy, courage, and determination. Nord (2004) does not explicate her meta-ethical position, nor does she discuss these concepts in depth or clarify their relationship to loyalty. Chesterman (1997) identifies trust and upholding trust as catalysts for loyal behaviour: “one is loyal in order not to lose trust; it is not the case that one trusts in order not to lose loyalty” (153). In Nord (2004), the picture is less clear. Loyalty appears as both a means and a goal in itself. Furthermore, the wording “loyalty as an ethics of …” seems to position loyalty as an ethical umbrella category covering the whole range of translation ethics, which leads to the danger of blurring concepts rather than clarifying and developing them.
Prunč (1997b) proposed a different kind of “broadening” of the loyalty concept (136). Prunč criticizes Nord’s approach, claiming that it limits the translator’s responsibility to resolving any conflicting goals between loyalty to the author, the commissioner, and the target audience. He concedes that such a model of loyalty widens the translator’s scope of action (in comparison to what would be acceptable from a traditional translational equivalence-based point of view) but fails to recognize the translator’s own ethical position. Therefore, in addition to the loyalties to the source text author, to the initiator, and to the recipients, Prunč introduces a fourth loyalty: the translator’s loyalty to him-/herself. This loyalty to oneself ranks above the other loyalties and as such functions as the decisive authority in case of any other conflicts of loyalty. Prunč regards such conflicts as inevitable, considering the nature of translation as an ideology- and culture-laden process. This fourfold conceptualization of loyalty provides the researcher with greater flexibility in modelling translational action. It enables, for example, the modelling of translation that takes place under conditions where the social relationship between the action partners is characterized by extreme asymmetries in power, status, and ideologies and where translation is employed as a strategy of resistance or subversion (36). Prunč’s agenda is not limited to research. TS has the responsibility to engage in the construction of a “democratic translation culture” (see the next section) and to ethically empower translators to implement a translation ethics that does justice to the central role that translators have played and continue to play in transcultural communication. In line with this agenda, Prunč (2008) added further aspects to his concept of loyalty: the translator’s loyalty to the profession, and, more importantly, the idea of reciprocal loyalties (31). In a democratic society, with its consensus on equal rights, loyalty should never be a one-way street, and as such the partners in a given translational action should therefore be committed to reciprocal loyalty.

4 New debates and emerging issues

4.1 Translation cultures

In 1997 Prunč introduced the concept of translation culture and continued to elaborate on the concept in the following decade (especially 1997a, 2005, 2008, 2012). The birth of the concept of translation culture was the result of Prunč’s efforts towards advancing the functionalist translation theory. As a functionalist with a deep interest in and broad understanding of systemic, cultural, and sociological approaches, Prunč was well aware of the shortcomings in the functionalist theories of Vermeer and Holz-Mänttäri. For Prunč, one, if not the central, problem was the implied equality of the players involved; i.e. equality in terms of the possibility to achieve one’s own goals in a given setting. Prunč’s aim was to embed functionalist thinking in a framework that takes broader social contexts and dimensions such as power, status, and intention into account. Prunč (2012) defines translation culture as

the historically grown, self-referential and self-regulating sub-system of a culture that relates to the action field of translation, which derives from a dialectical relationship to translation practice. It consists of a set of socially established, controlled and controllable norms, conventions, expectations, values and habitualized behavioural patterns shared by all actors actually or potentially involved in the translation processes within the relevant culture.

(340, my translation)

Prunč sees translation culture as a social construct, a relatively independent subculture that reflects social consensus and dissent with regard to allowed, recommended, and obligatory forms of
Functional translation theories and ethics

As such, this construct is the result of a balance between the interests of individuals and institutions engaged in the various levels and fields of translation. Translation cultures develop dynamically over time. Contemporary translation practice always takes place in relation to a given consensus, preserving it or deviating from it, and thus the practice itself plays an active role in shaping translation culture. Over the years, Prunč identified various constructive elements of translation culture, i.e. issues that can become the focal point of norms, conventions etc. Amongst these elements we find qualitative parameters; loyalties (see earlier); translation directionality; the role of the mother tongue and foreign language acquisition; institutionalized translator education; fields of translation; standard relationships between source text and target text; conventional skopoi (distinction between “implicit” and “explicit” skopoi, cases of obligatory skopos explication); the status of translation; the roles and visibility of translators/interpreters; selection of source texts; the translator’s capital; and habitus (see Hebenstreit 2018).

Prunč (1997a) argues that TS should engage in researching historical as well as contemporary translation cultures. This is primarily a call for descriptive, explanatory research, but it is developed further in Prunč’s (2005) strong conviction that TS should become actively involved in the shaping of translation cultures and help to build a democratically organized translation culture, where translators, as equals among other actors, can act as co-creators of intellectual spaces, textual worlds, and cultures. One might argue that, on the level of theoretical modeling, Prunč rejects the implication of the total equality between action partners that underlies Holz-Mänttäri’s thinking, whilst personally sharing her egalitarian values as a goal worth fighting for. One step towards what today might still be deemed a “utopia” (Prunč 2012, 342) would be the improvement of the social status of translation and translators. Attaining that goal would require a joint effort from individuals, professional organizations, and academia. The promotion of the status of translation in a society as an ethical responsibility of TS has also been addressed by (Vermeer [1990] 2007b, 17–18) and Holz-Mänttäri (1994, 370–371).

4.2 Towards a democratic translation culture and a functionalist ethics of translation

In 2008, Prunč identified four principles underlying the construction of a democratic translation culture: cooperation (“Kooperativität”), loyalty (“Loyalität”), transparency (“Transparenz”), and ecology (“Ökologizität”). The cooperation principle comprises respect for the legitimate interests of all action partners and a willingness to negotiate sound solutions, to balance everyone’s interests, and to work towards a lasting minimization and prevention of conflicts (30). In relation to loyalty, Prunč strongly rejects any kind of unidirectionality, rather viewing loyalty as a multilateral principle that binds all action partners (see earlier). When conflicts of interests prove irresolvable, the translator has to take responsibility for his/her decision to act to the (dis)advantage of one or more of the action partners. (Not only) In such situations, transparency is essential in order to ensure mutual trust. Transparency involves clarifying the individual premises of a given translation and its skopos, enabling a review of translational decisions and also aspects such as visible authorship and accountability (32). Finally, the ecology principle aims at preserving resources in the widest sense of the word. Its application highlights the fact that translatorial acts are not only about efficiency, but also about sustainability, i.e. taking into account long-term consequences of a given translatorial action at social and cultural levels in the participating cultures, including the source, target, and translation cultures (32).

The constructive principles of cooperation, loyalty, transparency, and ecology connect translation culture to translation ethics. When addressing the issue of translation ethics, Prunč (2012) explicitly refers to value theory and virtue ethics. Following Pieper’s (2007) construction of
value hierarchies in democratic societies, Prunč lists the following values as the pinnacle of a democratic translation culture: human rights, human dignity, tolerance, respect for the otherness of others, equality of opportunities (with reference to Cronin), solidarity, openness to dialogue and consensus, emancipation of the deprived and of minorities (with reference to Venuti), economical use of resources, minimization of conflicts, and sustainability (Prunč 2012, 358).

Whilst Chesterman (2001) proposes a “Hieronymic Oath” (see Chapter 2 “Virtue ethics in translation” in this volume), Prunč (2012) formulates a “maxim of action” for translators:

Act loyally to your action partners, but also be self-confident enough to demand their loyalty; use both your own and your partners’ resources economically and consider the sustainability of your actions; act professionally and protect the reputation of your profession; act in compliance with the norms of your translation culture, however, have the courage to act against these norms, assume the responsibility for such a step, and lay open the reasons for your decision.

(357–358, my translation)

This maxim of action is not intended to replace ethical codes (see also Chapter 20 “Ethics codes for interpreters and translators” in this volume). Unlike many ethical codes, it provides a way out of moral dilemmas caused by conflicting norms. It does not pretend to be universally applicable, insofar as it clearly pertains to current European translation cultures. In this context, it is worth noting that Prunč (1997a) views the refusal of translation (“Translationsverweigerung”) and the decline of translation (“Translationsverzicht”) as possible translational action and, consequently, as important options in the context of translation ethics (2005).

Although Prunč speaks of translation culture as a “deontic” system and places it at the centre of his reflections on translation ethics, it would be wrong to equate translation culture with translation ethics or a proper system of morals, because translation cultures can contain various kinds of norms that are not necessarily moral. Rather, translation ethics, of which professional codes of ethics are usually an important part, is just one of many constituents of a given translation culture. The understanding of translation culture as a subsystem of culture implies that there can be several coexisting translation cultures. Today’s professional world is characterized by ongoing processes of diversification and the hybridization of professional profiles, giving birth to new translation subcultures with potentially differing ethical systems. Furthermore, there is a growing field of “non-professional” translation that should not be ignored when discussing translation ethics (see also Chapter 16 “Ethics of volunteering in translation and interpreting” in this volume). The concept of translation culture may serve as a flexible framework for an analysis of translation ethics in all of these fields, particularly considering that its conceptualization as a subsystem of culture, with the inherent possibility of various kinds of nesting and overlap, fits well with the general conception of ethics as group-related norms (cf. Pieper 2007).

5 Conclusions

Looking at the development of TS over the past decades reveals a clear shift of interest away from purely or primarily linguistic aspects to more general aspects of human interaction in the widest sense of the word. Vermeer’s skopos theory and Holz-Mänttäri’s theory of translational action stand at a point in this historical development where the focus had only just started to move towards the broader scope of interaction between people. If one views ethics as an aspect of interpersonal relationships, it is hardly surprising that these early theories do not initially incorporate translational ethics; even less so, when taking into consideration that the model inherent
to those theories is that of an “ideal translator.” However, the authors do address issues that are interesting from an ethical viewpoint, namely freedom, the translator’s responsibilities, cooperation, and professionalism.

Both theories regard the translation’s intended function, its skopos, in the target culture as the main driving force of the translation process and the only means of control. This raises the question as to whether there are or should be limits imposed on the eligibility of skopoi. For Nord, such limits are drawn according to parameters pertaining to the translator’s loyalty, i.e. the responsibility not to betray any of the action partners. When the debate on translation ethics gained more scholarly interest within TS at the beginning of the new millennium, Nord tried to expand the concept to cover a greater range of ethical issues. Prunč then went on to present his value- and virtue-based approach to functionalist translation ethics within the framework of translation culture. Contrary to Vermeer, Prunč takes an almost activistic position towards translation ethics and advocates the construction of a democratic translation culture with cooperation, loyalty, transparency, and ecology as guiding principles for translational action.

If Christiane Nord was the first amongst functionalist TS scholars to address the issue of translation ethics, it was with Erich Prunč that functionalism fully embraced the issue of ethics in translation. Prunč’s loyalty principle is both multilateral and reciprocal. His understanding of ethics does not reduce the translator to a bearer of moral obligations. Instead, he advocates that the translator is also bestowed with moral rights. This advocacy appears to be an important contribution towards empowering translators on the ethical frontier. In a contemporary professional world where translation technologies have been taking away more and more one-dimensional routine tasks from the translators’ sphere of work, Prunč argues that what remains for human translators is “the realm of a creative and ethically responsible treatment of texts” (Prunč 2012, 337, my translation).

Related topics in this volume

Virtue ethics/Aristotelian ethics; Hieronymic Oath and linguistic first aid; professional translator; codes of ethics.

References


Further reading


This monograph is a comprehensive overview of and introduction to functionalist approaches in TS. Individual chapters are devoted to historical development; the theory of translational action; skopos theory; functionalism in translator training, in literary translation, and in interpreter training studies; translation criticism; and loyalty. The book closes with chapters on the developments in the 1990s and the new millennium.


This article starts with an overview of the development of the concept “responsibility” in ethics from its historical origins to current approaches. It covers the traditional distinction between “responsibility” and “accountability” and moves on to prospective dimensions, i.e. social and future aspects of responsibility and, against this background, discusses responsibility in Vermeer’s skopos theory.


This study makes use of the loyalty concept in the context of translation revision, adding translation editors to the list of possible roles in translational action and shedding light on a case where translators are a possible target of loyalty.


The article provides an historical introduction to Prunč’s concept of translation culture and offers a comparative analysis of translational values and virtues as found in the works of Prunč and Chesterman, including Chesterman’s “Hieronymic Oath” and Prunč’s “maxim of action.”