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Translation, risk management and cognition

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25.1 Introduction

Risk management is a relatively new set of concepts in the study of translation. It can be applied to all kinds of decision making, at many different levels, from the running of translation companies through to the translator’s cognitive management of uncertainty while translating. One of the potential advantages of the approach is thus that it can extend from the cognitive to the social (and back), bringing many disciplinary perspectives to bear on translation phenomena.

One of the possible drawbacks, though, is that since the term “risk” is not bound to cognitive science in any strong way, many disciplines use it in quite different ways, inviting as much confusion as insight. The term probably comes from the Ancient Greek ῥιζικόν (“root”, used as a metaphor for an obstacle to be avoided at sea) or ῥίζα (“cliff”), similarly to be avoided at sea. This negative sense of a danger to be avoided was carried through in the Latin forms resicum, risicum, riscus and the vernaculars (Luhmann, 1991, p. 8; Skjong, 2005). The first occurrence of the term with a positive meaning (“to dare, to undertake, enterprise, hope for economic success”) may have been in Middle High German in 1507 (Skjong, 2005)—the story that the older Chinese characters 危机 (“crisis”) mean both “danger” and “opportunity” is apocryphal. From the mid-seventeenth century, theories of probability gave risk a mathematical sense, with the mortality risk of diseases being calculated by John Graunt in 1662. This mathematical sense later provided the basis for applications to business models, most clearly in the distinction made by Knight (1921) between risk as a “known chance” and uncertainty as an “immeasurable probability”.

Risk management, as a specific term, then developed from the 1940s as an extension of “market management” (Dionne, 2013). It has since become a rationalism of business decision making, where the ideal is to quantify and prioritize risks in terms of magnitude and frequency while taking steps to minimize the negative consequences. The presupposition of rationality has nevertheless long been tempered by studies in the psychology of risk, for example in experiments where subjects who are made to feel confident about their risk management tend to take more risks (Krueger & Dickson, 1994).

Our task here is to relate those different senses to existing studies on various aspects of translation (cognitive and otherwise), and to propose areas in which risk management can help solve problems in cognitive studies.
25.2 Preludes to cognitive risk management in Translation Studies

Not surprisingly, some of the first applications of risk management to translation concerned setting up and running a translation business, drawing on the kind of theory that can be found in any course on business practices. Stoeller (2003), for example, offers sound advice to translation project managers, basically providing checklists that help project managers to plan what to do when things go wrong. This means categorizing the kinds of risks: “tigers” have high probability and high impact, while “kittens” have low probability and low impact—so you plan for the tigers and learn to live with the kittens. A series of commentators (e.g. Akbari, 2009; Canfora & Ottmann, 2015, 2018; Lammers, 2011) similarly apply business models to translation, without prolonged attention to what might be specific to translation as a business and without attempting to enter any cognitive or psychological dimension involved in translating language. Like the MBA graduates who tend to run translation companies in the US, these commentators basically see translation as just another business.

The potential for a more cognitive application of risk management nevertheless came from early forays into the psychology of translators. Henderson (1987), in attempting to compare the personalities of translators and interpreters, touches on the particular importance of interpreters’ confidence and “tolerance of ambiguity”, both traits that could be seen in terms of a greater propensity for risk taking. These and similar psychological factors were then investigated using think-aloud protocols. Fraser (1996) proposed that translators with more experience become good at finding ways to “live with” uncertainty in the start text—in the sense that one translation problem can be solved in several different ways (this “indeterminacy of translation” was formulated by Quine, 1960). Fraser (2000, p. 123) further investigated translators’ particular “tolerance of ambiguity and uncertainty”, finding that professionals generally have more tolerance than do novices. Tirkkonen-Condit (2000) similarly uses think-aloud protocols to observe the way translators use “uncertainty management”, basically by becoming proficient at advancing tentative solutions. House (2000) looks at student translators’ use of reference books and not surprisingly suggests that high-frequency use is related to low-risk personalities, whereas high-risk takers are confident with and without reference books. More intriguingly, House further finds that low-risk learners may enjoy being denied the support of dictionaries if other means of support are available, such as group work. That is, there is an emotional aspect to risk taking—there can be enjoyment, as all gamblers know.

These think-aloud studies, working on data from very small groups, do not mention risk management as such. Their concern is more explicitly with uncertainty management, as has been the case in later process studies that employ a wider variety of methods (cf. Angelone, 2010; Angelone & Shreve, 2011). Their frequent concern is with comparing the performances of novices and experts, in search of an empirical basis for a model of translation competence or expertise. They thus tend to bundle variables together, for example by insisting that trainers should boost the learners’ confidence, since enhanced confidence is associated with greater emotional investment in the task, encourages tolerance of uncertainty, and tends to result in higher-quality translations. All good things come together. In the meantime, the most influential models of translation competence (PACTE, EMT) have been based on committees agreeing around a table rather than any bottom-up process research (despite appearances of firm empirical bases in Hurtado, 2017 and Toudic, 2012), and the calls for enhanced confidence thus remained difficult to separate from simple guesswork, where the novice’s reduction of uncertainty can equally tend to be associated with a heightened risk of failure.
These initial forays into the general field of risk and uncertainty managed to touch on most of the topics that have been picked up in more recent research. They did not, however, look closely at the way risk is discussed in economics or business studies (where the distinction between risk and uncertainty had been operative for a long time), and they tended to forget the initial research interest in relating risk to the translator’s personality. Further, the almost exclusive focus of attention was the translator’s relation with the start text (source text) and occasionally with “reference books”. The question of risk changes considerably when the scene includes machine translation, group translation, relations with clients and relations with end users. Risk is involved in all those relationships, since people other than the lone translator are taking risks whenever they choose to trust a particular translator.

When one loses sight of those other relations, one also loses the potential to have the risk management connect cognitive processes with social and economic constraints, with a reduced set of concepts addressing related problems at all those levels.

25.3 Core issues

The first attempts to apply risk management to translation in a more general way might be dated from Wils (2005), who saw that the basic concepts could become a whole approach to translation. In the same years, Pym (2004/2005) argued that attention to risk management could explain translation processes in ways that mainstream linguistics and uncertainty analysis (i.e. the numbers of possible translation solutions) were unable to: three noun phrases may have exactly the same status as linguistic problems (let’s say, each with three possible renditions), yet only one of them might be high risk for achieving the translator’s communicative purpose. Sentence-level linguistics and uncertainty counts cannot see that risk.

This commonsensical insistence on communicative pragmatics also allows one to address issues of effort distribution: all else being equal, translators should invest more effort in solving the high-risk problem and should not spend too long on the low-risk problems. Some support for this proposition is found in empirical observations that more experienced translators have a more uneven distribution of effort than do novices: they tend to automatize some complex tasks but also shift between automatized routine tasks and conscious problem solving (Jääskeläinen & Tirkkonen-Condit, 1991; Krings, 1988; see Englund Dimitrova, 2005, p. 15; Pym, 2008a). Novices, on the other hand, appear to be more prone to not investing sufficient effort in high-risk items (i.e. guessing) and investing too much effort in low-risk items (i.e. over-translating).

There is, however, more at stake than getting students to rationalize their distribution of effort.

25.3.1 What is specific to translation?

One of the reasons for turning to risk management does not concern cognitive studies in the close sense of observing what goes on in translators’ brains. It has more to do with solving a problem of definition in what one might call pure translation theory, on the level of what goes on when commentators and theorists write.

Broadly since the Early Modern period, the Western translation form has operated through claims of fidelity to the start text, variously conceptualized in the twentieth century as “adequacy” and then “equivalence”. Not surprisingly, cognitive studies on uncertainty and risk have mostly focused on the same relation with the start text. That focus, however, has been challenged in two ways. For a range of approaches spanning from hermeneutics to deconstruction, the meaning of a text is indeterminate, allowing different understandings by different readers. This means that
there is, in theory, little stability in the start text to which the translator could be faithful, adequate or equivalent. That is, there is uncertainty at the source, even prior to the translator’s attempts to render the text into other languages. A further challenge has then come from German-language skopos theory, which proposes that the translator’s priority should be to fulfil the target-side purpose, breaking with equivalence claims as required (Reiss & Vermeer, 1984, p. 100). This effectively throws several other spanners into the works. First, it increases the potential uncertainty in the translator’s decision-making process. (What to do, for example, when the client’s instructions contradict the start text and the receiver’s expectations?) And then, if the translator now has the right to adapt everything, can the product still be called a translation?

These challenges have effectively undone the conceptual basis on which the translation form had been institutionalized for several centuries. They constitute a theoretical problem in dire need of a solution. Risk management can provide something like a way out.

The first step is to abandon the presumption of substantially reproduced meaning. A translation has the status of a translation because it is received as a translation, that is, because it creates the illusory supposition that the value of the translated text is on some level the same as that of an anterior text in another language. The terms “illusory” and “value” are motivated here. Think of the way the monetary system depends on the illusion that banknotes or electronic numbers actually represent something like gold, when they do not do so in any full way. It is the shared illusion that creates the value. Break that illusion, and the monetary system falls down. Any social system requires this element of illusio if it is to function (Bourdieu, 1980, pp. 103–104). Translation may be no different.

What this means is that the translator’s work is going to be socially valued as such for as long as it maintains credibility in the eyes of those receiving the translation, including whoever is paying for the translation. From this perspective, the greatest risk is not necessarily misrepresenting the start text or failing to resolve uncertainties but losing the trust of the other parties involved in the communication act. What risk must translators manage? First and foremost, it is their credibility.

This is the level, quite removed from the intricacies of text-bound cognition, where risk management can offer a way of rethinking whole translation forms without abandoning the specificity of translation altogether. For each historical or cultural translation form, one can describe the things that credibility entails (a language border, the alien-I, and quantitative co-variance in the case of the Western translation form, but those features can vary). The important point is that the translator’s cognitive processes are, on this view, guided by a framing need to maintain trust, and that this general disposition is to be analysed in terms of each specific translation form.

25.3.2 What types of risk are pertinent to translation?

Adopting this broad approach, Pym (2015) attempts to distinguish between three different kinds of risk that are involved in the translating process:

- **Credibility risk**, as we have seen, concerns the need to gain and maintain trust relationships with the other parties involved in the communicative act. Its nature varies in accordance with historical translation forms. In negative terms, this is the risk of losing trust.

- **Uncertainty risk**, then, concerns the translator’s doubts about how to render a start-text item. This is the kind of risk that has been dealt with in think-aloud protocol studies under the aegis of “uncertainty management”. In negative terms, it is the risk of rendering a start-text item in a non-optimal way.

- **Communicative risk** is then the risk of the translation not fulfilling the desired communicative function, no matter how that specific aim might be established.
These three kinds of risk are obviously related. In an ideal situation, assessment of the communicative risk should define the kind of optimal rendition required, and thus regulate uncertainty risk, while credibility risk would define the kind of communicative risk pertinent to the translation as a translation. The risks are nevertheless quite different when seen in terms of frames for decision making. Two start-text items can have exactly the same linguistic status and entail exactly the same uncertainty risk (a throw-away example would be the names of the mother and the midwife in a birth certificate) yet be radically different in terms of communicative risk (a mistake in the name of the mother would be high risk; in the name of the midwife, not as high). Or again, a Chinese government translator might adopt some radical rewriting in order to make official jargon understandable to the Western English-language reader, thus reducing communicative risk, yet in so doing they incur the risk of losing the trust of their government employers (“this is not what we expect of our translators”) and possibly of informed China-watchers (“this does not read like an official Chinese translation”). Such discrepancies between the three kinds of risk thus open up pathways for several further kinds of analysis.

Most usefully, the discrepancy between uncertainty and communicative risk enables an analysis of how much effort should be invested in reducing uncertainty. Here we adopt a principle of effability, which fictitiously posits that all uncertainties produced in the translatorial reading of the start text could be resolved if the translating subject simply worked hard enough. This is indeed the fiction that many beginner translators fall into, and that some of their instructors are strangely pleased to encourage. Attention to communicative risk, however, tells us that some start-text problems involve higher risks than others. A simple rationalism then proposes that the translator should work most on the problems that involve the greatest communicative risks, and less on those that do not. This is impeccable common-sense advice that obviously needs no fancy theory to sustain it. Yet it is overlooked by the widespread fiction that all uncertainty can and should be resolved. Further, as noted earlier, it allows learners to be warned of two particularly ubiquitous sins: when the translator invests high effort in a low-risk problem, the result is over-translation—recognized as a professional shortcoming since Mounin (1963)—and when the translator invests low effort in a high-risk problem, the result is guesswork, which can have rather more serious consequences. The more general principle is obviously that the degree of effort should be adjusted to correspond to the degree of communicative risk, not the degree of uncertainty.

This kind of modelling finds some justification in empirical studies, mentioned earlier, that show professional translators having a more irregular distribution of effort in their problem solving, as opposed to novices, who tend to have a more even distribution, working hard to solve every problem that comes along.

25.3.3 What types of risk management are pertinent to translation?

A more traditional categorization of risk is in terms of what can be done with it: the translator can reduce it (risk reduction), transfer it to parties like clients or readers (risk transfer), accept it (risk taking), reduce it by introducing a risk of lesser proportions (risk mitigation), or use combinations of all these possibilities. In theory, such strategies can be applied to all three kinds of risk (credibility, uncertainty and communication). The following examples concern uncertainty and communicative risk:

- **Risk reduction** accounts for all the preliminary processing, documentation, checking, revision and reviewing that can be done by the translator, and possibly pre-editing, then post-editing,
Risk transfer is when a party other than the translator is in some way made responsible for a decision. For instance, the translator may not know whether to use the intimate or formal second person when promoting a computer product, and consultation of parallel texts fails to resolve the issue (both cases can be found), so the client is consulted. Once the client decides, the risk of communicative failure has been transferred to them. (Another strategy for risk reduction here would be to avoid the second person altogether.) In a wonderful think-aloud study on how students and professionals rendered a semi-colon, Künzli (2004) found that some professionals considered adding a note for the client (risk transfer), whereas the student translators were more prone to guess (risk taking).

- Risk taking is where the translator is aware that a decision may involve serious risks but makes the decision anyway. In some cases, such decisions are uneducated enough to count as guesses: student think-aloud studies abound in self-justifications such as “It sounds better” (Pavlović, 2010), where intuition becomes a reason for choosing between alternative solutions. Robinson (1991) argues that many translation decisions are based on “gut feelings”—we translate as much with our body as we do with our mind. Extreme examples of risk taking might include magnificent works like Ezra Pound’s *Cathay* (1915), using poetic intuition to render Chinese poetry in the absence of direct knowledge of the Chinese language.

- Risk mitigation in a translation context is a hybrid strategy employed when a minor risk is incurred in order to reduce a major risk (Pym & Matsushita, 2018). For example, the use of untranslated start-text terms in the translation can be seen as transferring the risk of interpretation to the reader, although at the hopefully lower risk of confusing some readers. The giving of multiple solutions might be viewed in the same way: some of those solutions might muddy the reception, but one will hopefully succeed (Matsushita, 2016).

By combining these strategies with the various kinds of risk, a fairly rich and varied metalanguage can be developed for describing the ways translators solve problems, with reference to translation as a social relation (credibility), as a particular kind of textual product (uncertainty) and as an effective social action (communication). This is also a metalanguage that can prove useful in the training of translators, where it can be taught through practical activities and examples, making students reflect on their own assessments of relative risks.

More importantly, perhaps, this is a conceptual framework that does not make some of the major assumptions that have proved precarious over time: it does not espouse equivalence or fidelity; it does not assume just one set of translation norms; and although it certainly does assume a rational subject in its theoretical calculations of comparative risks and corresponding effort distributions, actual human calculations are inescapably subjective, made by the translator in the act, and conceptual space can and should be made for non-rationalist models of intuition, inspiration and confidence (see later).

### 25.3.3.1 Is there a translator personality?

When one goes over the think-aloud protocol studies in search of examples of risk management, the overwhelming majority of instances concern risk aversion. This conclusion can also be reached from textual studies of “translation tendencies” (after Levý, 1963/2011), where it is generally found that, when compared with non-translations, translations tend to be simpler, less varied in lexicon, more explicit, less given to extreme writtenness or spokenness (Shlesinger, 1989, in Pym, 2007), and so on (Pym, 2008b). All these tendencies would indicate risk aversion. One might therefore legitimately wonder whether risk aversion forms part of a particular
translator personality. Do particularly risk-averse people become translators? Or does translating perhaps turn you into a particularly risk-averse person?

As mentioned, some of the think-aloud studies have asked similar questions, generally concluding that experienced translators develop something called “tolerance of ambiguity and uncertainty” (Fraser, 2000) and positing that development of such psychological traits should be an important part of translator training (Tirkkonen-Condit, 2000). Research on this tolerance has continued, in part because it can be measured with established psychometric instruments. Bolaños Medina (2015) finds that students who do not think they are cut out to become professional translators tend to obtain low scores for ambiguity tolerance (although this might simply mean they express underlying anxiety on both counts, and perhaps in many other instances as well). Rosiers and Eyckman (2017, p. 52) find that interpreters have greater ambiguity tolerance than do translators; they propose that “the nature of the interpreter’s job aids the development of tolerance of ambiguity” (although the personality trait might have been there first). Other research could be mustered along similar lines: some forms of emotional intelligence (Hubscher-Davidson, 2013) could be key in avoiding panic (and thus unwarranted risk taking), and higher self-esteem and emotional stability could similarly help manage risks in sign language interpreting (Bontempo et al., 2014), although the exact connections with risk seem not to have been investigated. Ongoing research by Pirouznik (see Pirouznik, 2014) finds no significant correlation between translators’ personalities and risk taking, although the research does not compare translators with non-translators or novices.

Some of the research on ambiguity tolerance seems interestingly coloured by the political origins of the term. Frenkel-Brunswik (1949) first developed the construct to study ethnocentrism in children, with low ambiguity intolerance being associated with “the authoritarian personality” (Adorno et al., 1950). Since translation is supposed to work across cultures, the last thing one ideologically wants to find is ethnocentric authoritarianism. Yet that understandable desire seems to be a long way from the situation where the translator is uniquely aware of several legitimate ways to solve a problem, and usually has to opt for one of them. Decisions are made; some kind of authority is assumed. The ability to take underdetermined decisions might well be a correlative of ambiguity tolerance (since that is what the studies find), but its strictly cognitive dimension does not necessarily connect with any disposition to risk aversion.

Indeed, the connection with risk aversion, if there is any, may not be a consequence of cognitive processes or personality traits at all. It seems more likely to ensue from the way translators are employed and viewed in certain social situations. In a translation culture where the intermediary is supposed to be subservient and invisible, a translator has little motivation to take risks: there are no rewards to be gained. As Leonardo Bruni (1405/1969, pp. 102–103) complained, if something in the translation is good, the author gets the credit, and if something is bad, the translator gets the blame. The problem may be that most cognitive studies and personality tests have been carried out in situations where translators are culturally conditioned to be risk averse.

25.3.3.2 How is risk related to the reception of translations?

In an early paper, Fraser (1996) compared how “commercial translators” and “community translators” expressed uncertainty about how much explanatory information they should add to a government brochure. These doubts concerned not just the limits of the translation task, but also the translators’ images of who their receivers were—the community translators were marginally more concerned with envisaging the receiver.

This observation is of some import for general translation theory, and indeed for the pragmatics of reception. Theories of “audience design”, dating from Bell (1984/1997, 2001) and working from the “participation framework” modelled by Goffman (1981), broadly
propose that text producers adjust their style to suit particular kinds of audience (basically addressees, auditors, overhearers and eavesdroppers). The idea has been applied to translation (particularly in Mason, 2000) and has been allied with the general theory that the way one translates depends primarily on the purpose (skopos) of the translation (Reiss & Vermeer, 1984, p. 100): “Essentially the audience design in translation is what the Skopos Theory is about” (Schubert, 2005, p. 132). The operative assumption underlying most of these approaches is that the translator can know, should know and sometimes does in fact know where the translation is headed and who is going to use it. In terms of applied risk management, however, that assumption is often rather precarious.

Bell (1984/1997, p. 162) actually has two major categories in his tree of audience types: “responsive audience design”, when the text producer knows who the receiver is and adjusts appropriately, and “initiative audience design”, when that knowledge is not in place and the producer uses a certain style in the hope that the corresponding people will be reached—in a sense, the translation goes looking for its readership. It is not entirely clear how these two types map onto the translator’s risk management. If the translator knows where the text is going, “responsive” design can justify some intelligent risk management, potentially using all available strategies. On the other hand, if the translator has significant doubts about the possible audiences, Bell’s “initiative design” would suggest that the translator adopts a risk-taking attitude, opting for choices that may not suit all but will eventually be agreeable to someone. And yet all the evidence we have, from admittedly limited cultural situations, is that risk aversion dominates.

Tellingly, some of the studies that apply the notion of audience design actually reveal unclear or multiple reception. Suojanen et al. (2015), advocating an approach called “user-centered translation”, admit that the translator’s audience can be a “murky, faceless entity”, but they then claim that “audience design has potential as a tool that clarifies the target audience” (2015, p. 69). This clarification is supposed to come from having the translator reflect on a checklist of possible audiences: addressees, auditors, overhearers, etc. Confrontation with actual checklists nevertheless shows that the translator often has only a faint idea of who could be out there and has limited resources for adjustments to the various possibilities (see Suojanen et al., 2015, pp. 26, 136–137). When the purpose and the readership are in doubt, and there are no rewards for taking risks, the translator has several reasons to produce a bland lowest-common-denominator text. Who could blame them for being risk averse?

One might lament (as does Nord, 2014) that translators are not more courageous in their decisions. But if we want them to take intelligent risks, we have to make sure they are aware of who their communication partners are and what rewards the translator will reap from communicative success.

25.4 Recent developments

Risk management remains a minor avenue of research in Translation Studies, with only occasional mention in empirical cognitive studies. It nevertheless offers a powerful instrument for interpreting and explaining the results of cognitive studies. Further, it can do so in ways that connect to some of the ongoing general discussions in the discipline. Here I look at three such discussions: attention to group translation work, the claims of neural machine translation, and increasing awareness that emotions play a role in translation. All three cases concern more than the lone translator.
25.4.1 Risk in distributed translation tasks

Although much of the research on cognitive processes looks at situations where the lone translator is confronting a text, translation scholars are increasingly aware that other people are also involved: co-translators, revisers, reviewers, editors, clients, censors, distributors and receivers can all play roles in the creation of meaning. Machine translation and translation memories effectively enact similar extensions, adding the work of previous translators to the mix. This extended scene obliges us to consider not just the risk relations between the translator and the text, but also the relations between the translator and the other actors in the scene.

We know remarkably little about how readers construe translations. If losing credibility is the greatest risk to the translator, it is in the process of reception that the game is played. At the same time, receivers clearly take risks when they decide to trust one translator rather than another. So what kinds of signals indicate that a translator is trustworthy? A certain economic analysis of the signalling is possible (Pym et al., 2012), but what behavioural or textual features trigger the loss of trust? There is a whole set of cognitive processes waiting to be discovered on the receiver’s side.

The categories of risk management invite studies that assess the strategies of all participants in a translation event and use that matrix to try to explain translator decisions. An example would be Hui’s 2012 study of a simulated training activity, where risk analysis is applied at all levels, from translator–client relations and end-user analysis right through to think-aloud protocols of the translation process and clients’ evaluations of translator performance, including a risk disposition profile for each translator (based on the risk strategies evinced in each solution contemplated and the solutions finally selected). A more extreme case of a whole-situation analysis would be the multi-party risk taking surrounding an instance of effective non-translation by a military interpreter in Afghanistan (Pym, 2016), where the interpreter’s actions would break all the codes of professional ethics but can nevertheless be explained as a rational instance of risk management in a particularly high-risk environment.

Such analysis can involve factors that are not commonly seen in a narrow focus on the intermediary’s choices; they operate more on the level of language policy (Pym, 2018). In studies on the use of interpreters in asylum-seeker centres (Fiedler & Wohlfarth, 2018; Pokorn & Čibej, 2018), researchers were surprised to find that the recent migrants often did not appreciate the presence of the interpreters, who were ostensibly there to help them. The interpreters were implicitly not trusted, perhaps because the migrants placed more value on independence and learning the host language, but also possibly because the migrants were from cultures where mediation is likely to be by an informant of some kind. Trust was not established, and so the migrants instead calculated the risks, accepting to work with interpreters only in high-risk situations. Similarly, in many healthcare encounters doctors choose not to use interpreters in low-risk situations where the expense (in time, more than money) is not merited by the potential risk (Diamond et al., 2009). Both these cases suggest that professional mediation is most called for in particularly high-risk situations. This may be a further reason for adopting risk management as a frame of analysis.

25.4.2 Risk in the use of machine translation

As the quality of machine translation improves, the translator’s work increasingly involves various degrees of post-editing, which is a distributed task that potentially involves a special kind of risk management. Krings (1995/2001) does talk about uncertainty in the post-editing process, but
we know relatively little about how those processes differ from the revision of a human translation. Once again, the more important game could be played out on the side of reception.

The greatest perceived risk is no doubt the idea that machine translation will replace human translators. Why should a human mediator be called for when developers claim that neural machine translation has now reached “parity” with fully human translation? Microsoft researchers make this claim on the basis of 18 million bilingual sentence pairs being evaluated by “bilingual crowd workers”, who were asked whether each candidate translation conveyed “the semantics of the source text” (Hassan et al., 2018, p. 3). On this measure, the MT outputs were found to be statistically as good as the reference human translations. From the perspective of risk management, though, the important point is that the human testing was of context-free sentence pairs being assessed in terms of content, not form. To appreciate the problem, imagine you are a client being told that there are only two mistakes per page of output, and that this probability is the same in both machine and human translation. So is there the same communicative risk? If one of the things we know about professional translators is that they can distinguish intuitively between low-risk and high-risk textual items, and they can invest more effort in solving the high-risk problems, then the chances of those two errors being calamitous should be much lower for the human translation, at least until the neural algorithms can detect communicative risks and redistribute effort.

Given the continued presence of communicative risk, the role of human translators may be expected to become that of the guarantor or certifier of (post-edited) machine translations. Rather than sell numbers of words, translators will sell trustworthiness.

### 25.4.3 Risk as a play of emotions

Many areas of the humanities have been turning to the role of emotions in what once appeared to be rational decision-making processes. Risk management is no exception. As rationalist risk management theory was developing within economics, Keynes (1936/1962, pp. 161–162) remained aware that economies also run on ‘animal spirits’. It has been found, for example, that investors overprice stocks on cloudy days (Goetzmann et al., 2015), and it seems that a country’s economy is boosted by similar emotions if they win the World Cup in football (although no reliable economic study on this seems to be available). Such connections with emotions have rarely been dealt with in process studies on translation, but they have never been far away. When Frenkel-Brunswik (1949, p. 108) formulated “ambiguity tolerance” as an instrument, she was partly working from “emotional ambivalence”. More recently, as noted earlier, the numerical variables of cognitive studies are paralleled by serious calls for attention to “emotional intelligence” (Hubscher-Davidson, 2013), while Robinson has gone from the somatics of the translator (Robinson, 1991) to the wider “socioaffective ecologies” by which civilizations work and interrelate (for example, Robinson, 2017).

Most of these openings to emotion are nevertheless hard to relate to risk management as such. Their broad claims and checklists of psychological traits seem somehow either too sweeping or too static to relate to the very specific kinds of decisions that concern risk. One might consider building on more particular aspects like the nervous excitement of consciously taking some kinds of risks (as noted by House, 2000), the emotional balancing act of presenting swear words to an undefined audience (Hjort, 2017), the quite different anxious optimism of trusting a translator or a client for the first time, the sense of commitment and responsibility of being trusted for the first time, the gut feeling of deception when trust is betrayed, and even the feeling of intense relief that comes at the end of an interpreting assignment yet is not so available to the written translator, for whom there is always the lingering risk that a mistake will be discovered. Such
emotions might also hopefully be related to the kinds of happiness that translators experience at work (Liu, 2013) and to enjoyment of linguistic difference as a kind of aesthetic pleasure rather than a trigger for guilt (Malmkjær, 2007).

To reach some of these particularly positive emotions, translators would have to break from regimes of subservience to other social actors, of inadequacy in the face of impossible goals, and of guilt ensuing from a job that could always have been done better. A major step in that direction could be the recognition that risk taking can be justified, pleasurable and socially rewarded.

25.5 Concluding remarks: Ways to mediate in risk society

Modernity has been described in term of a developing “risk society” (Beck, 1986; Giddens, 1999), in part because technological complexity and environmental threats mean that cause and consequence cannot be grasped and controlled directly. We once trusted a multitude of intermediaries (doctors, scientists, banks, electricity companies, and so on) to control cause and effect, but as that trust breaks down, each of those relations becomes a calculation of risk, with attendant anxiety. The work of translators is no different in this regard: the illusory certainties of “the translation” delivered by “the professional” have largely given way to relative probabilities of communicative success and calculated distributions of effort. In the meantime, the free availability of machine translation means that everyone can do some kind of translation, so all translators can be second-guessed. This opens at least two possible avenues for translators’ management of risks.

On the one hand, as mentioned, the role of the professional translator might become that of the consecrated post-editor, the authority who can legitimize one among many variants, the professional who sells degrees of trustworthiness rather than numbers of words. (People still go to doctors for calming advice, since self-diagnosis on the Internet just makes people feel nervous and sick; they might turn to professional translators for similar reasons.) Translators thus become figures of authority, taking on the risks of those who turn to them; they learn to look and sound trustworthy, in denial of the indeterminism at the core of their task.

On the other hand, the technologies of machine translation, of cheap publication and of crowdsourcing open new possibilities for the social dimension of translation. The kind of secret “insider” translation knowledge that print culture long reserved for the lone translator can now be made more public: all can potentially participate in the excitement and pleasures of variant solutions, engaging in and producing multiple different translations, sharing rather than transferring risks, extending and enhancing what has technically been called tolerance of ambiguity but has always been the opposite of the authoritarian personality and cultural closure.

Exactly how such technological possibilities affect translators’ cognitive processes remains to be discovered. Before we can even begin to tackle such questions, however, we need some kind of empirical answers to a few of the basic questions raised by the concept of risk management. For example, do human translators consistently distinguish between low-risk and high-risk problems? Do they really expend less effort on low-risk problems (in a way that machine translation does not)? Do readers and/or clients actually choose to trust a translation on the level of the whole text and/or appropriateness to the communicative situation? Do readers trust a translation or an image of the translator? Does the social status of the translator actually affect the way a translation is received? To what extent are readers with field expertise able to correct machine translation errors as they read and thus mitigate high risks? Is it more efficient for them to read in this way or to employ a human translator? To what extent are certain personality types given to enjoy the indeterminacy of translation problems, either as translators or as readers? And do the answers to these questions depend in the first place on a particular historical translation form (which can change)?
When we have data rather than brave assumptions on these points, we might be able to indicate a way forward.

Further reading


This ground-breaking empirical research demonstrates how the concepts of risk management can account for translation decisions that might otherwise appear to be ethically aberrant. The cases include not just print news translation but also the work of media interpreters at press conferences, where they are called upon to deal with highly sensitive topics on the fly.


This article attempts to bring together and name the various levels on which risk management can be applied to translation, mustering evidence from cognitive and textual studies. It nevertheless fails to include risk mitigation as a category, which was added to the conceptual framework later (Pym & Matsushita, 2018).

References


Translation, risk management and cognition


Pym


