

Translator ethics and professionalism in Internet interactions¹

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Tempora mutantur et nos mutamur in illis.

Anonymous

Though specific actions change with the passing of every hour in the flow of our individual timeline, there are some matters which do not change. These are the principles under which we conduct ourselves.

In more ancient times, it was held by common wisdom that *times change and we change with them* in the sense that we adapt or are forcibly adapted to change over time. Whether we adapt perceptibly or not, voluntarily or not, there is within our mental framework an overarching umbrella of thought which influences that adaption which we call *conscience*. It is a 'studied observation of things together' etymologically from the Latin *cum scientia*, and that knowledgeable observation is guided by a set of internal principles which, depending on your background and education, we call *ethics* or *morals*.

Our *ethics* (Gk. *ηθικη*, customs) are not something which we have invented but rather come down through generations. They are not handed down in word-perfect format, though some principles may so be passed on as a Decalogue of religious and social commandments learned by rote whose internal values are perceived, appreciated and accepted.

Similarly to shared words of a language for communication, our ethics are principles about actions and works shared with others who interact with us.

Many ethical principles we accept internally and immediately, recognising them as being relevant to our conduct. Our Roman forbears accepted these principles calling them *morals* (Lat. *mos, mores*) which influenced good conduct.

No nation or civilisation has been able to develop without ethics or a moral value system. It is particularly significant, from a historical perspective and time span, that those transient civilisations which did not have a strong ethical fibre in their conduct, particularly of public affairs, declined very quickly. We merely have to look at those nations which sprang up and disappeared in the last century alone, within a short number of years, where so-called 'cultures' quite literally halved populations such as the Pol Pot *régime* in Cambodia or crippled a nation economically as the Third Reich did to Germany. While populations may be forced to endure such civilisations, at the earliest opportunity, populations will move, not just fleeing a persecution, towards a better and fairer moral value system.

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If a significant number of private moral or ethical values were not transposed into public affairs, then that particular nation would soon slip into decline. Those nations which have had important and meritorious principles of ethical conduct have always attracted attention and support.

For nations, please now read 'groups', 'associations', 'communities', etc. For historical times, now read the 'present day'.

In modern times, professional groupings take unto themselves a code of conduct which they call 'ethics'. It is not that they have invented the principles of the code, but rather they have taken many, but at times not all, of the principles and applied them to their profession. Hence, we talk, for example, of 'medical ethics' or the 'ethics' of the nursing, legal or accounting professions.

At the worst, such ethics are an external system of rules and regulations for which some members of that profession may have little regard. If that happens, it is not the fault of the system or of the principles, but rather of the individual who may have less sensitivity for the values which the principles offer.

The medical profession, in most countries of the world, follows the principal tenets of the ancient physicians, Hippocrates and Galen, in the observance of various medical principles, of which of '*first, do no harm*' to the patient is but one. It does not mean that harm will not come to the patient with the treatment, but that, in theory and in adherence to respected practice, the medical professional will attempt not to permanently hurt the individual.

For modern translators, there also has to be a corpus or body of ethical or moral principles which apply daily to the work of translation. These principles are becoming increasingly important in the modern world due the problem caused by the immediate and instantaneous communication of the Internet.

The Internet is with us for less than a quarter of a century, if one takes the first basic TCP/IP network of 1983 as its starting point. It is now impossible to imagine the modern world without the Internet. It provides communication at many levels from private one-to-one emails, public mailing lists, confidential and secret transmission of sensitive coded data of all sorts, down to injurious and annoying spam. In the centre of this apparent maelstrom of communication transmission, the translator is becoming increasingly important. Where importance occurs, values follows and principles trail.

In the pre-Internet era, translators were almost a different species of professional where the urgency and in-your-face immediacy of present day translation did not apply to the same degree. The translator had either to write out by hand—for others to typeset—or to use manual typewriters to recreate the format of the text. The electric typewriter was a subsequent short-lived invention. It was a slower pace of life and the translator was able to nurture the text with time-honed skills.

Nowadays, the translator uses that professionalism to 'type over' an electronic text, or

using optical character recognition (OCR) software will extract a text for processing with ease from a document. The translator is using another set of skills, but the underlying ethical principles must still apply. The Internet interaction between client and translator is immediate to everyone's advantage. An unavailable translator can recommend other colleagues with a couple of keystrokes. The 'letter' stating unavailability is back with the client in minutes as an 'email'. What is amazing compared to pre-Internet eras is the speed of the various transactions from setting up the translation to its final delivery and payment.

While on the one hand the Internet may appear anonymous in that clients are not seen face to face, or the translators applying their skills to effect the translation do not meet the client, if we stand back and look at the situation it is no more anonymous than buying a tin of beans from a producer whom we have never met. The bottom professional and ethical line must be in the terms of a hypothetical 'Sale of Goods and Services Act' that the translation must serve the purpose for which it is meant.

The translation must be true, fair and accurate to a professional degree, otherwise the translation is unethical. It is as simple as that. A manufacturer not seeing the end user of his tin of beans has no reason for it to be any less perfect. So too, with the translator, who does not see the Internet client. There can be no complacency for infringing an ethical boundary merely because of present day limitations of the Internet.

This present article is not meant to be prophetic, but it is not beyond the bounds of imagination that standard emails from clients in some years time, will have a clickable link where the client in a movie clip will explain, verbally and visually, the terms and conditions of the required translation .

One could say that, with an international tool like the Internet, English as a language will dominate as it does in music and in international business. In one sense, this is partially correct as English as a language, at the last count, accounted for 55% of Internet transmission, with some two hundred principal other languages vying for small percentages of the 45% balance.

What one does see as a professional translator is the continuous flow of translation of subject matters into English, far, far in excess of the flow towards any other language. This in itself is not a cause for concern, because the translator is not there to influence the marketplace, but what is of concern, at the quality control level, is the lack of standards applied to translation into proper English. Not just the text, but the language itself, must be treated as that Hippocratic patient to whom no harm must be done, causing mongrel versions of the language to be created by carelessness.

The immediacy of work obtained and transmitted via the Internet also gives rise to a series of concerns. Gone are the days when an enterprise would request the translation of a text and be willing to wait a week to see if any translator applied for the job. Nowadays, through the Internet, an enterprise will have a number of translators electronically queuing up before close of the day's business, ready, willing and able to translate the text in

question.

In this context, we are talking of a text without problem as to its content and we are talking of translators without problem as to their professional competence. The quaint picture of an erudite St. Jerome patiently labouring over the translation of a biblical text from Greek to Latin, penning each word with an old fashioned quill, without a shelf of hardcopy dictionaries to hand for reference, without the facility of a Google search for a comforting confirmation, is well removed from modern reality. The modern translator has tools undreamt-of in the past to hand, and strangely enough, with these tools come new ethical and professional responsibilities.

Using the Internet, the 'new' translator is remarkably different to the translator of yore. Generally now, he or she is faceless, known to the client or the agency only as the voice at the end of a phone-line or as the person whose *CV/résumé* has been provided with copies of degrees, diplomas and references.

The Internet translator assume a huge responsibility in translating while based in one country for a client on the far side of the earth. It is not simply the question of the rendering of a text into an acceptable standard within the target language or one of its variants. It is also a question frequently nowadays of working to a client's time deadline of hours in a different time zone, as opposed to a more relaxed deadline that of days or weeks, as would have been the case in the past, where texts were mailed on once completed. A present generation of translators under 35 years of age has no idea what translation involved prior to the arrival of the Internet!

The 'new' Internet translator whether working individually or in a collective situation bears the same burden of professional ethics as the pre- Internet translator. The over-riding principles stay the same; the relative conditions change with every text. However, the 'new' translator whose conscience is provoked or aroused by moral principles as to a translation situation has all the advantages of the advances of the Internet in seeking help quickly from other professionals or from an association body.

The principles of ethics governing a translator's work are applications of the great moral principles, based not on the quicksand of relativism, but solidly founded on the absolute foundation of what is good in itself, to the avoidance of what is wrong, for the pure, simple and unadulterated reason, that good is right, and that bad is wrong.

Each translator, in his or her own daily endeavours will normally apply without thinking ethical principles. Here, one is making the huge assumption that the translator is of sound and healthy mind.

The Internet, as a tool, does not make the translator's life automatically better. It can. It may. It depends on the translator. The use of the tool is dependent on the translator. Not the other way round! If the translator lives a blissful life without the use of a spellchecker, that translator must possess perfect keyboard fingering and a photographic proofreading capacity! Modern translation tools are eschewed at one's professional peril.

What the Internet—and here one is talking of the more serious side of its communications—has brought to our lives is essentially immediacy and information. It is up to the translator to know how to use both of these in a responsible manner, guided not just by personal relativistic convenience, but by a principled focus on what is right in itself, not right by circumstance.

There is also the question of ethical non-translation which trustfully will not rear its head too frequently in a professional life. Non-translation is an underdeveloped concept in the whole area of translation. It refers to four areas: the translator, the client, the text, and the conditions under which the first three come about.

The translator is under no professional or ethical obligation to translate everything that comes across his/her desk. This is a very difficult statement to make but it stands to reason, even for translators who are full-time employed by a client/employer. Simple examples prove the point. The translator is competent in translating from Spanish. A client may request a translation from Portuguese – are they not very similar languages? [a true life example]. The translator must refuse out of professional competence.

The client may ask for some correspondence and a mechanical specification to be translated. The business correspondence is fine, but the mechanical specification turns to be a motorised machinegun emplacement [a true life example]. The translator could refuse as her CV clearly states that she does not translate military or scientific texts.

The ethics of non-translation can extend very simply to texts where the translator states that he/she, being an expert in that field, will only translate pharmaceutical texts, and will rightly decline any other text where experience is lacking. Please note that non-translation also has a moral foundation where a translator will also rightly decline to translate porn if ethical or religious sensibilities are offended.

The interaction of all three aspects above – translator, client and text – give rise to the fourth aspect, namely the conditions. Ethical considerations also attach to the conditions. The translator may well decline the work because it is known in the business that the client does not pay on time. This may be of small importance to the translator, but can be of huge importance to an agency where cash flow is king, and the agency's own translators have to be paid on time. There may also be the ethical aspect of a rate which is cut-throat, or of a deadline which is impossible to meet under normal professional conditions, or even the simple ethical nature of a translator's promise to be home for Thanksgiving which would have to be set aside to meet the client's demands [a true life example].

There is a debate also raging as to areas of competence. Interpreters know this and will seek out terminology before going into conferences on specific topics. Translators must also know and recognise the moral limits of their competence. Speaking fluently and knowing both source and target languages is no guarantee of accuracy of translation in a myriad of fields.

The presence of a tool such as the Internet, nor even the acknowledgement of a number of underlying principles for working in translation are no guarantee for the perfectly fair, true and accurate translation. All translators will still commit errors while they continue to be human; some will undoubtedly misrepresent their capacity for work or their abilities and skills. The Internet does make that easier for the unscrupulous, hence the need for a recognised 'professionalism' copperfastened by scrutinised membership of national or international associations and groupings.

The interaction which the Internet brings in our professional work is primarily and essentially a juncture of opportunity for both the client and the translator. The resulting translation or non-translation prove the quality of the principles being applied.

Ethics and morals invariably end up by being prescriptive either under the pricks of conscience, rules and regulations, applied case law, or even in the law of the land. The translator cannot eschew the prescription. The translator must not overreach either the natural ability or the learned science.

The conscience of the translator should not exist suffering from a poverty of principles but rather should enjoy the luxury of comfort which those principles offer in adherence to truth, accuracy, fairness, and legality.

Whether the translator is paid early or late, much or little, or not at all, is the economic reality of life. However, the translator must be able to stand over each text and say hand on heart 'I really could not have done better. This, professionally, is a proud moment for me'. If such can be said, Internet interactions will have found translator ethics and professionalism at their very best.

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