

The Ethics of Non-Translation¹

by

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There are two sides to the ethical coin, though most people working in translation will be more familiar with the ethics of '*doing*' as opposed to the ethics of '*not doing*'. The translator, working in a professional fashion and environment, will attempt to produce that faithful mirror-image in the target language of all the twists and turns, the plain sailing and the subtle nuances of the source text, and, having completed the final product with a personal murmur ranging from a 'not bad at all' to a 'quite well done', will dispatch the item to the client. Such is the professionalism of the translator newly arrived on the translation scene, or that of the wily old fox of a translator who knows every trick of the trade.

However, apart from the '*doing*' of a translation, the translator can at times be faced with a dilemma — be mindful please of its original etymology of the Greek *dí lemma* 'two assumptions' — to translate or not to translate at all.

The first ethical consideration of the translator is almost Hippocratic as with the medical profession — '*primum non nocere*' — first do no harm. If the translation is going to do harm, the translator should try to avoid it, e.g. the DIY instructions for homemade hand-grenades. Others may have different or lower standards, but the translator with a finely-tuned sense of what is right and wrong will always try to avoid the doing of harm.

The second ethical consideration—and one must avoid here a presenting of ethics as if a type of Decalogue or Ten Commandments—is conscience. Each individual translator is gifted with the presence of a personal conscience which many describe as the greatest subjective indicator any person possesses. Conscience is a maturing of the mind, educated by environment, by family, by professional training and even to a certain extent by intuition. If the text to be translated offends conscience, then the translator should not translate it. A simple example of this would be the declining to translate a speech of a businessman or public figure whose comments on all sorts of minorities are generally held to be obnoxious and contemptible.

The translator may then hold to a number of principles, first among which might be not to translate outside one's own area of competence or expertise. The translator may be a gifted translator of computer software texts, but not have a clue on pharmaceutical texts. *On principle*, as we say, the translator may decide never to translate on military, nuclear or biological weaponry. There is nothing 'wrong' with such translation being done, but a particular translator may feel uncomfortable with it and so seek to avoid it.

Far more likely, the translator may be asked from time to time to translate porn(ography) or a screenplay on gratuitous violence, etc. and, *on principle*, decline to do so.

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However, some texts will be avoided *on principle* out of sheer mind-numbing failed personal experiences e.g. the translation of poetry. On the silver screen, stage and television, seasoned actors will, *on principle* born out of experience, decline to work with 'small children and animals' because of the latter's unpredictability. *Mutatis mutandis*, the seasoned translator will avoid working with his or her own 'pets', otherwise known as unpredictable clients.

One of the most frequent ethical causes of non-translation is quite simply the declining of work from a client who had not paid for the first job or whose payments are so erratic that a carnival 'Wall of Death' is a safer and more secure option. A translator is ethically correct in refusing to accept a fresh task for translation when a previous task remains unpaid. While there are various sub-elements to this particular ethical cause, the main element is nevertheless summed up in the English phrase 'once bitten, twice shy'. The translator should not be 'shy' of declining the new task if 'bitten' on the old one.

This particular aspect of declining work because of non-payment is of special ethical importance to translation agencies, which have the weekly/monthly obligation of paying their own staff and bills. To take on a dubious-as-to-payment second translation when the first one has not been paid for may well, at the end of the day, deprive the agency of funds needed to pay its own staff for their work done.

It is professional for the translator not just to translate well. It is professional for the translator not to translate at all where strictures of harm, conscience, principle or payment practice *inter alia* are brought into the equation.

Professionalism is not just about doing your utmost for the client to the very best of your learning, experience and training. Professionalism is also about the ability to say 'no' for just ethical cause. Such professionalism is not a thornless rose to be plucked easily from the bush. It requires not just education and the recognition of your peers in professional association; it requires courage born out of experience, and trust and confidence in one's own ethical ability to perform or not to perform, as the case may be, in accordance with one's own conscience and principles.

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