

# Translation Ethics: From Invisibility to Difference

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## **Abstract**

Since its inception as an academic discipline, Translation Studies has contributed in the past few decades to raise the status of translation as a field of critical thought in general, and of translators as cultural agents in particular. However, translation and translators have been around for millennia, and to speak of them is to speak of the very roots of language and civilization. It is also to speak about ethics. In this article, I propose to briefly review the history of translation ethics, by beginning to make an etymological and conceptual distinction between *ethics* and *morality*, and then focusing on the notion of fidelity as the traditional moral guideline for translators. Afterwards, I will try to demonstrate the paradigm shift that has, more recently, been taking place in translation discourses. Casting away the age-old veil of neutrality and invisibility which has covered translation practice in the past, many thinkers have come to reimagine and reposition what it means to translate and, more important, what it means to translate ethically.

**Keywords:** translation; translation ethics; fidelity; invisibility; Translation Studies.

The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.

Ludwig Wittgenstein

## **Between Ethics and Morality**

To ask about ethics or morality is, in fact, to ask about one of the most intimate and simultaneously universal aspects of humankind. It is to ask about the meaning of existence. Not in a teleological way, regarding the purpose of our lives and life in general, but in a pragmatic sense, concerning how we exist, how we live, how we relate to each other, how we are towards and with each other. The question, with its long accompanying tradition, is so far-reaching one can trace its origins to the dawn of civilization. For me, of course, (and most likely for the reader) heir of the rich communion between the Hellenic World and the Judeo-Christian culture, morality has a particular aspect to it which I share with the community I am part of. Therefore, to speak about ethics one has to be aware of said past which has been bestowed upon us, mindful of the different – and often divergent – answers that have been given to that fundamental question “How should I live?” It is to remember the Aristotelian *eudaimonia*, the Jewish Talmud, Rousseau’s social contract or Hobbes’ founding myth, Kant’s categorical imperative, the Marxist critique to the ruling moral order, Nietzsche’s master and slave morality, and even more recently the alterity ethics of Emmanuel Levinas. This sparse enumeration seeks only to give proof of the awareness of this pensive past we, as a community, have in common, seeing that these pages do not aim to be a reflexion on the history of morality itself. However, as I address this topic by making use of the terms, it is fair (if not necessary) that I should speak of them and attempt to clarify what I am referring to when I talk about morality and ethics.

The word “ethics” has its roots in two Greek terms whose spelling and sound, albeit similar, have different meanings: the term ἔθος (*éthos*) refers to the “customs”, the “usage” or “way of proceeding”; whereas ἦθος (*êthos*) means “habitation”, “den”, “way of being” or “character”. Seeing that this is an analysis on translation I cannot help but deem curious the fact that the usage of the Latin term *moralis*, and consequently the term “morality”, is owed to the virtuous hands of a translator. In the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, Marcus Tullius Cicero translated the term ἠθικός (*ethikos*) from the Greek, into the Latin equivalent *moralis*, which in turn derives from *mos* and signifies “habits” or “customs”. Notwithstanding the profound impact that this and other of

Cicero's translations had on the Latin language, the philosopher (haply) forgot the original distinction of the two Greek words, bringing his translation closer to the first term presented, ἦθος (*éthos*) (cf. Cabral 334-335).<sup>1</sup> Whether deliberate or not, this act did not go unnoticed by many western thinkers that drank from this etymological source. A significant example of this might be that of Martin Heidegger who, in his *Letter on Humanism*, addresses the importance of not forgetting the connection the word "ethics" has with the original "habitation" of humankind. Nonetheless, other authors chose to forget this distinction thus using both terms indistinguishably. One does not need to go back far in time to find authors who choose to use both words to refer to this common reality, i.e., the one pertaining the values which guide human behaviour. I call attention, for example, to Mary Midgley's opening article to the *Companion to Ethics*, edited by Peter Singer, where the author points out that she does not make a distinction between the two terms. Singer himself, in another oeuvre, does not seem to give preference to either term: "What is it to make a moral judgment, or to argue about an ethical issue, or to live according to ethical standards?" (Singer 9).

In the course of this exposition I shall not be indifferent regarding the usage and meaning of these two terms. Still, I shall keep in mind and be aware that the authors invoked herein might not make the same conceptual distinction. As such, I will keep it solely as a reference and in attempting to clarify said distinction I would point out that the term "morality" can be etymologically placed closer to the habits and customs (of a certain people), meaning that in symbolic terms when one speaks of morality they refer to the exterior aspect of human behaviour, which is manifested in community rules and crystalized through laws. On the other hand, ethics might pertain to the groundwork of morality and in this case, more specifically, to *moral philosophy*; or it can also concern the innerness of actions, overlooking the common rules and focusing on the personal motivations of those who perform them.

## **Translation Ethics**

The professionalization of a certain social or cultural task, as it is the case with translation, involves the regulation of the community that carries out that role. Such rules and such codes arise and should be pondered within the field of ethics, seeing that they pertain to the behaviour of individual people and professionals. Moreover,

translation should be seen as an activity with ethical implications and translators as its potential ethical agents, seeing that they play a central role in the cultural systems, shaping societies and nations in an increasingly globalized world. In fact, one should look at translation not merely as a linguistic exercise, but as an action grounded in ethical principles and framed in a certain ideological and political sphere. In particular, it is of interest to reflect about ethics in translation because translations can, in a very pragmatic sense, affect the lives of the people who might depend on them:

The decisions made during the course of translating and interpreting can potentially have considerable impact on the survival of individuals and even whole communities; at the very least they can impact the quality of life of those who rely on the translator or interpreter to mediate for them, whether in business meetings or healthcare encounters, in daily interaction between host country officials and vulnerable migrants, or in preparing instructions for the use of a food mixer. (Baker and Maier 4)

It is also for these reasons that we need to look at translation and its agents from an ethical point of view, describing the standards that have guided their behaviour in the past, the paradigmatic changes they are facing today and the challenges they will meet in the future.

### **A Tradition of Invisibility**

Throughout Western tradition, translation has been regarded with mistrust and gained a status that does not do it justice. Only more recently has this status begun to be rehabilitated. Such a widespread mistrust towards translation becomes apparent when one is reminded of the famous wordplay *traduttore, traditore*, which reveals the veil of treason translation critics would cover its practitioners with. Another case that clearly expresses this narrow view is the use of the expression *les belles infidèles*, through which it is clear to see the matter of fidelity as a symbol and a result of the culturally “myopic” gaze (Steiner 65), as well as the issue of sexism – both literally and figuratively<sup>2</sup> –, that has marked translation in the West (cf. Valdez 53). However, the story that most evidently demonstrates the bad reputation translation has gained over the course of history is probably the fabled biblical myth of the Tower of Babel. Humanity’s titanic effort to reach the skies was met solely with divine wrath. To

punish its greed, God shattered the Tower and Eden's pure language into a thousand pieces, with each of those fragmented languages being able to only express one shred of the divine reality. The sentence for humanity's crime: the plethora of languages to translate; and who serves it: translators. Their task reflects the original verdict that left humankind dispersed and plunged in a silencing haze, as George Steiner puts it: "Translators are men groping towards each other in a common mist" (65). Following the words of Jacques Derrida, one finds the same conclusion, namely that translation can be perceived in mythological terms as a necessary evil or even a curse, in that it is both indispensable and at the same time impossible.

These approaches portray a history of translation that has been written according to the precept of fidelity, of which the greater and most significant example is the writing of the Septuagint. On the one hand, the translation of the sacred text reveals what Etienne Dolet would later advocate in the sixteenth-century as the (moral) obligations of translators: perfect knowledge of the languages from which and into which the translation is being made, and impeccable neutrality. On the other hand, the translation of the seventy can be construed as a paradigm to understand the sacred nature that coated the texts and authors – which came predominantly from religion and philosophy – and the way they were treated with a feeling of upmost authorial reverence. The demanded neutrality should manifest itself in the exact transposition of the source text form, giving priority to words and sentence construction rather than content and underlying meaning (cf. Wyke 111). It becomes clear that the pursuit of fidelity and neutrality is, simultaneously, a pursuit for invisibility. If translators were expected to remain neutral with regard to the text, their task was not interpretative but rather plainly relational. Just like the telephone operators of yesteryear, translators were supposed to simply establish the connection between one language and another, as if it were a mechanical and futile act, a "code switching" (Içöz 131). With German Romanticism, in the late eighteenth-century, one can begin to see some signs of weakness in this translation paradigm; there is a focus shift from fidelity to the issues of cultural difference and the question of alterity. Nonetheless, even to this day, the ideal of faithfulness and neutrality continues to characterize the practice and theoretical discourses of translation. If on the one hand, many translation organizations around the world continue to use in their codes of ethics expressions like "fidelity" and "impartiality", on the other hand, Translation Studies, which as an academic field emerged in the second half of the twentieth-century, has not had much time yet – compared to the weight of the ancient morality

of translation faithfulness – to make piercing and long-lasting changes to this paradigm. Notwithstanding the time it takes for new ideas to sink into day-to-day practices, many recent authors have been critical of the translation stereotypes perpetuated until this day, encouraging the disuse of expressions like “fidelity” and “literality”.

### **Towards an Ethics of Difference**

In the beginning of the nineteenth-century, more precisely in 1813, Friedrich Schleiermacher laid a milestone in translation theory. In addition to naming two types of translators – those who work with commercial texts, and those more creative (according to the Schleiermacher) who dedicate themselves to artistic and scholarly works –, the author also makes the important distinction between two possible approaches in bridging the author of the source text and the reader of the target text. Schleiermacher considered that the difference was to be found in the way the translator would attempt to bring the author closer to the target context – taking in account the necessary linguistic and cultural implications, i.e., domesticating them –, or, on the contrary, bring the reader closer to the author and, as a xenophilic gesture, try to keep their foreign and unfamiliar nature intact. In fact, one can recognize the very same idea in the words of an author who is slightly closer to us historically: “the properly ethical aim of the translating act is receiving the foreign as foreign” (Berman 285).<sup>3</sup> For the reader to truly be able to enjoy the adventitious essence of a work or an author, Schleiermacher argues for the practice of this second type of translation, rather than the strategy of naturalization. Bearing in mind the exposure Lawrence Venuti will later make of the status of translators, it is curious that such a choice in translation methodology makes the translator more visible, seeing that the text might possibly *lose* the fluency that so deeply is esteemed by translation critics.<sup>4</sup> Regarding Venuti’s analysis and critique of the invisibility veil translators were forced to wear for so many centuries, the author argues that the objective of this ideal of textual fluency is to create an illusion in the eyes of the reader, namely that they are in the presence of an untranslated text. The perceived fluency of a text – and, by extension, its level of domestication – is thus proportional to the illusion created, which in turn means a greater faithfulness to the author.

While it is true that until the 1950s one continues to hear thinkers insisting on the idea that the sole responsibility of translators is to accurately reproduce the text “and nothing but the text” (Nabokov 212), from the 1970s onwards, it is possible to notice a paradigm shift in translation discourses. Alongside Venuti’s critique, the establishment of the *Skopos* theory – by authors such as Hans Vermeer and Katharina Reiss – offered a new possibility to think translation ethics separately from the concept of fidelity (cf. Koskinen 20). Like other functionalist approaches, the *Skopos* theory aims to think translation practice regarding the purpose of a text, or as the term hints at, its function:

It can be claimed that both functionalism together with descriptivism are particularly concerned with questions, such as: who translates the text, what is the text that needs translation, to whom is it directed, when is it translated, why is it translated, where is it translated and how is it translated? (Alwazna 52)

Within the framework of the *Skopos* theory, to ask about the functions of a text is to think beyond the literary canon which has been, on the whole, the main concern of translation discourses, thus opening up such discourses to the possibility of analysing other text types, considering the challenges they bring, and putting forth strategies and methodologies suited to each particular situation. One of the criticisms made to the theory is that it grants too much freedom to translators, to which Vermeer responds that it only confers on them their due responsibility in the world (cf. Vermeer 14).

In postmodern philosophy, the field of deconstruction, and in particular the writings of Jacques Derrida, has offered Translation Studies a breeding ground to rethink the status of the source text and, consequently, the ethical stance translators should have towards it. In the past, interpreting was not something which would be expected of translators, whose single task was to find textual equivalences; postmodernity, however, argues that interpreting is in itself inseparable from reading. One could even argue that interpreting represents a radical act of reading, in that *meaning* does not reside in the text itself, waiting to be extracted or unveiled by the reader, but is bestowed to it by those who read, by those who interpret. The translator’s moral customs demand that they stay unrelated to the text, outside of it, exerting a nearly ghostly presence of faithful reproduction, for the sake of their alleged invisibility. That is, the less interpretative the act of translating is, the more faithful and invisible the translator’s signature will be in the end result. Hence,

Derrida's proposal invites translators to occupy their rightful place in the construction of meaning that is translating. It no longer makes sense to keep the delusive veil of neutrality, because translating implies reading, ergo, interpreting, giving meaning and, ultimately, *transforming*: "According to postmodern thought, however, these traditional requirements are unattainable, as is the notion of complete reproduction or transferal of the original, because translation will always transform it" (Wyke 113).

Together with Jiří Levý, Anthony Pym has underlined the decisive aspect of translation processes. Pym has also elaborated on the ethical role translators might play as cultural mediators, regarding translation itself as an intercultural transaction. Equipped with all their linguistic and cultural tools, professional translators become something like strategists in the communicational space established between two different cultures. In light of this, it is of no small importance to reemphasize the way translators are able to define themselves as ethical agents.

Still bearing in mind Venuti's critique of the translator's traditional status, I would also like to point out the work of Rosemary Arrojo, who addresses the likely *immoral* ambition of invisibility, which falls in accordance with the postmodern exposure of the intangible nature of a translation free of interpretation: "it has been argued that striving for invisibility can be seen as unethical. If translators embrace the fantasy that they can be completely objective and invisible, then they will not critically look at the role they are actually playing" (Wyke 113).

Notwithstanding that classical fidelity has been challenged by contemporary authors, it is true that this word – *fidelity* – is still very much present in the vocabulary of today's translation theorists and critics, not to mention the codes of practice upheld by translation organizations around the world. Still, it should be noted that the word has gained new meanings over the years that do not pertain necessarily to traditional and historical textual accuracy: "In today's discussions, fidelity can be defined in whatever way the speaker feels preferable" (Koskinen 20).

One can observe this conceptual displacement, more recently, with the case of feminist translation, which has moved the fidelity of translators away from the author or the text and closer to the writing project itself (cf. Simon 2). Arrojo also speaks of a fidelity imbued with cultural context. The fidelity of translators depends on their own convictions and principles, not just as individuals (personal morality), but as members of a community that validates them (cf. Arrojo 160).

Exposing the limitations of a unilateral approach to the relationship between translator and source text, Christiane Nord has sought to expand the concept of fidelity by replacing it in her discourse with “loyalty”. The author considers that this word expresses more clearly the responsibility which falls on translators throughout the performance of their tasks; a compromise that encompasses, at the same time, the source and the target contexts/systems. (cf. Nord 29). Nord sets a contrast between the concept of fidelity and loyalty as she identifies in the former a purely textual aspect, while the latter expresses an interpersonal category which is closer to the experience of translating.

These are just a few voices that have made themselves heard in the last couple of decades in the field of Translation Studies, and that have contributed to reimagining what an ethical translation is and what it means to be an ethical translator. Bearing in mind that many other authors, thinkers and scholars have been left out of these pages, I only hope that these few which were mentioned herein might be sufficient to prove the paradigm shift occurring in today’s translation discourses.

## **Conclusion**

The age-old moral tradition of faithful and invisible translators is apparently, albeit slowly, fading away. Other vanguards have been fostering a rejuvenated look at what it means to translate in such a multifarious world. Yet, it seems inevitable that one continues to see the word fidelity so widely disseminated in today’s translation discourses, whether it be because of the concept’s historical weight, or because it holds something authentic regarding translation itself: “It seems that fidelity is still perceived as the word to be used in speaking about translation and ethics” (Henry 370). One thing seems to be evident: contemporary translation scholars have made it their mission to rethink fidelity, whether silencing or reshaping it. However, as one author puts it, this cannot be the word-synthesis around which all ethical reflexion on translation revolves (cf. Koskinen 22). Questioning translation ethics might begin with fidelity, but it should not end with it; the world of translation and translators is far too complex to be summed up in one word: “Being ethical does not involve simply declaring fidelity, but, instead, sorting through difficult decisions and taking responsibility for those taken” (Wyke 114).

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<sup>1</sup> This article stems from an internship report originally written in Portuguese, which was presented to the Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas/Universidade Nova de Lisboa (FCSH/UNL) and defended before a jury in June 2016. Afterwards, it was presented at the Junior Researchers in Anglo-American Studies Seal Conference, held in Porto, Portugal, in May 2017. The *Logos Encyclopedia* herein cited is one of the most extensive encyclopaedic works elaborated in Portuguese in the field of Philosophy. Seeing that the English words "ethics" and "morality" share the same Latin roots as the Portuguese words "ética" and "moral/moralidade", I believe that the article cited is enough to substantiate this etymological distinction.

<sup>2</sup> On the one hand literally, because the profession was (historically) often delegated to the hands of women for being considered a less demanding or stimulating task, intellectually speaking. On the other hand, figuratively, translation occupied, just like women, a secondary and subservient position in relation to men, who in this analogy would be the "original" text. I would also like to take the opportunity to mention and show my profound appreciation for the invaluable contribution women translators have given to the cultural heritage of which I am heir. It would therefore not be in vain to remember that names such as Aphra Behn have not yet received their due historical acknowledgment.

<sup>3</sup> Schleiermacher's and Berman's positions should be interpreted with the necessary distance between them and distinguished from each other. While the latter's main theoretical concern in the status of the *Other*, the former does not yet dwell on this subject.

<sup>4</sup> Or, according to the author, "gains", by bringing the reader closer to the source (con)text.