

ETHICS AND EFFICIENCY IN TRANSLATION*

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ABSTRACT: An aspect of the professional translator's work that is often-overlooked is the client relations. Most clients are unaware of translators as professionals and many believe that any bilingual individual can function as a translator. This paper discusses

ways of keeping clientes satisfied without sacrificing professional integrity.

KEY-WORDS: Translation; Pragmatic translation; Client; Translator; Ethics; Efficiency.

The translation of promotional texts (publicity, advertisements) is a delicate matter because of the economic significance of such texts and the client's insufficient knowledge of the target language and its style conventions.

In a broad and simplified classification, Snell-Hornby (1988), distinguishes two major translation types: literary translation and technical or pragmatic translation. Aubert (1993) quoting Newmark (1981) states that if we accept the hypothesis of a close-knit correlation between text type and translation type, we should then examine the difference in treatment given to one and other texts by the translator. While the rendering of the content is essential to both literary and technical or pragmatic translation, form is diversely dealt with in these two translation modes.

In the translation of promotional texts, according to this classification a pragmatic translation, source form is irrelevant. The translator's main concern when translating this type of text should be to render a target language text with aesthetic effects equivalent to those present in the source language text.

Most ethical problems that translators of promotional texts come up against stems from inadequacies in the source text. What does the translator do when he discovers factual errors, inept reasoning, false conclusions or unreadable style? Should he correct mistakes, straighten out the logic, try to produce a more accessible text than the one he is working from? In short, is it part of his job to edit the text as he goes along, on his own accord? Or should he strive towards

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a faithful reproduction of the text he was given to translate?

After all, no one can blame him for being true to the text, but if he tries to improve it he can be accused of violating the source text or assuming an authority he was not given. And even the most diplomatic attempt to point out to the client that he cannot write properly will cause irritation or even a suspicion that the translator does not know his job. So what should the translator do? What does the translator do when he feels that a too-faithful translation would probably fall flat when presented to an audience abroad? This is a serious problem with texts intended to promote a client's products overseas, especially when the client does not understand the difficulties involved and only wants a *fair translation*. But what, in this case, is a *fair translation*?

There are situations where the only fair translation is a complete rewriting of the text. And what about fidelity and ethics?

The ethical issue arises from the fact that the client is not given quite what he thinks he is given. A translation should have what Eugene Nida (1969) called *dynamic equivalence*, i.e. it should affect an overseas reader in about the same way that the source text affects a reader in the country of origin. No translator will ever get all the way and the degree of success cannot be determined. But clients who are not linguists probably think that *dynamic equivalence* is exactly what they are getting from the translator.

We must pay attention to four points:

- 1) The intended purpose of the translation.
- 2) The situation and expectations of the client ordering the translation.
- 3) The relationship between client and translator growing out of these expectations.
- 4) The situation and obligations of the translator.

1. PURPOSE

The client wants to sell his products abroad. He has produced a text that he believes to be an effective promotion tool at home. The translation is supposed to be an equally effective promotion tool in the overseas market.

2. CLIENT'S SITUATION AND EXPECTATIONS

The client expects the translation to serve him abroad with about the same efficiency that he ascribes to the source text at home. But in most cases he is not able to assess how far these expectations are fulfilled. His knowledge of the target language is insufficient and he is not familiar with its style conventions. He may not even be aware that style conventions and presentation techniques can differ in different countries. Indeed, many clients seem to have an inadequate understanding of what translation really involves. They tend to see it as a kind of word substitution, expect word-to-word correspondence, believe that there is only one proper way to translate a text and that the translator's competence is reflected in his ability to find that single way. When told that in theory there can be an infinite number of formally correct translations of any given text, they appear incredulous and confused.

3. CLIENT-TRANSLATOR RELATIONSHIP

A client who is unfamiliar with the target language and its style conventions is at the mercy of his translator's competence and honesty. The relationship is similar to any other re-

lationship between a layman client and a supplier of a specialist service; the client can do no more than look for a supplier who inspires confidence and then rely on him. But he may be in a worse position than when he patronizes, say, a dentist, a watchmaker or a car mechanic. People tend to have a poorer understanding of the translation process than of dentistry, clock repair and car engines. But they do not realize this, since translation appears more easily understandable: *simple* word substitution, and all words are *listed in dictionaries!* After all, everybody uses language, but a root-canal filling is an extremely esoteric affair.

Besides, if a dentist or car mechanic does a bad job, the results will soon be painfully evident. But without adequate command of the target language, the client of a translator has no immediate criteria by which he can evaluate the quality of the product. So if the client loses faith in his translator, his only recourse is to seek for another specialist he feels he can trust, and so on *ad infinitum*.

4. TRANSLATOR'S SITUATION AND OBLIGATION

We have reached the most subjective part of these observations. What has been said so far was intended as a basis necessary for any meaningful discussion of this branch of translation ethics, but this does not mean that these final remarks are a logical conclusion. They represent a personal view.

Seen very strictly, the translator is in a hopeless situation. He is supposed to provide a product that is theoretically impossible, there are no objective criteria for assessment of his degree of success in striving toward the impossible, and his client is inadequately equipped to understand the nature of the problem.

But things are better than they seem. Constant striving toward a goal that is theoretically impossible is nothing unique: it is a workable ethical precept in many human pursuits. A theoretically impossible end goal does not rule out a high degree of success in practice. And the fact that available assessment criteria are fluid, to say the least, is also bearable. This is a situation the translator shares with workers in many fields, for instance advertising copywriters. The success criterion of advertising is simple: if the product sells, the writer and his client can be satisfied. But they can rarely be sure that it was some specific text that did the trick.

So the uncertainty whether a piece of writing is effective for its intended purpose applies already to the source text. But as far as the translator is concerned, the source text is justified by the fact that it was given out for translation. This means that his client believes in it, and it is not the translator's job to sit in judgement over his client's beliefs. He can safely assume that the source text is effective in the source language. If he has doubts about it they can remain private; he is under no obligation to convey them to his client. If he disagrees so emphatically that he considers it impossible to use the source text as the basis for what he believes to be an effective text in the target language, he had better decline the assignment.

However, if he accepts the assignment, any doubts that he may have about the efficiency of the source text in the home market will not absolve him from the obligation to produce what he believes to be an effective text for use abroad. His opinion of the source text is ethically irrelevant; his client has already vouched for that one. But when he presents his own product he should have as much faith in it as the client has in the source text. If he finds that he

cannot have such faith without rewriting, so be it. *Fair translation* is nothing less.

– Limits of rewriting

So the translator is at total liberty to mess about with the source text in any way he sees fit, perhaps without even consulting his client? As long as he believes he is right, there are no restrictions on what he can properly do? Of course there are. We have to delineate the authority he was just given.

It is a question of text perspective. There is a point where rewriting ceases and blends into text organization.

For full freedom to do a *fair translation*, the translator must have authority over the micro perspective of the text, i.e. each individual sentence and its immediate context: the sentence before it and the one after it. If he strays far beyond these limits, he risks to intrude upon the macro perspective of text organization, which is in part extralinguistic and must remain under the authority of whoever makes decisions on the source text. If the translator feels that such organizational changes would enable him to produce a more efficient translation, he should bring this to his client's attention. After all, the client should be able to recognize his text when it has been translated. Now, the client might not want his translator to take all this trouble. He asked for a *literal* translation, so shouldn't we make him happy with a text where he can trace the flow of every sentence and pinpoint every nominalized verb? After all, it is generally accepted that the one who pays the piper has a reasonable right to call the tune. Indeed, but what if he has no ear for music and asks for, say, a *rock'n roll* to be played at his wife's funeral? Should the translator-musician talk him out of it? And if this is not possible, maybe intention-

ally forget to bring the score sheets? The attempt to instruct clients in the exigences of translation can be a risky business. The conclusion is that the client does not have to know more than he deserves to know and is equipped to understand. With a few deft questions, the translator can feel out his client the way good doctors feel out patients to be able to decide how much they should be told about their own complaints.

So unless the client expresses a genuine interest in the translator's work and makes clear that it is within his intellectual grasp, the difficulty of achieving *dynamic equivalence* can remain a trade secret. This serves the interests of both parties, so there can be no objection on ethical grounds.

So for I have tried to demonstrate:

- that there can be a discrepancy between what a client can reasonably expect from a translator and what he is in fact given;
- that the client may not be aware of this, since he accepts and prints the product;
- that especially as far as promotional texts are concerned, this gives rise to ethical problems in that the client's promotion will be less effective than he thinks it is;
- that the translator/client relationship is difficult to organize on a mutually satisfactory basis, since the client's understanding of the translator's work is often inadequate;
- but that there are means by which the translator can get around this problem without violating client/supplier ethics.

This close the basic discussion. But if we leave the subject at this point, the net result will be unsatisfactory, since the problem has a dimension not yet touched on. For whatever the education, experience and competence of a translator, his or her working conditions will have a crucial influence on the quality of the work pro-

vided. In this context we must pay attention to a variety of factors that compromise the client's chances of getting fully idiomatic translations:

- Psychological aspect

For idiomatic translation, the expressive resources of the target language must be mobilized sentence by sentence. The translator must absorb the substance of each source sentence, mentally detach him/herself from the source language and then transform this substance into an equivalent target sentence. A translator who approaches his task in this way will often decide that the best way to translate a certain sentence is to turn it upside down, or even inside out.

- Economic aspect

Freelancer translators are paid on piecework basis. This encourages them to work as fast as possible, and with the least possible effort. They may have no economic incentive to recast sentences in the way just described.

- Time aspect

This is by far the most important factor. Translators tend to be brought in at the end of the production cycle, when initial deadlines have come and gone. Hence the desperate urgency well-known in all translation offices and the tendency

to put speed before quality. A translator who is ready and able to meet such demands is ready to face competition. The ability to offer the market what the market demands cannot, as such, be unethical. But it is difficult to avoid the suspicion that many mistakes would have been avoided if the client had been aware that undue time pressure compromises on professional standards.

The market is in fact asking for a bilingual person whose familiarity with various technical fields is wider than that of most specialized professionals. A person who has a scholar's flair for source criticism and who is sometimes prepared to produce a fair translation under heavier time pressure than that normally applied on the author of the source text. The issue can be reduced to a single precept: that of making clear to clients that such person, the humble translator, has an enormous and perhaps even bigger responsibility to the final text than that of the professionals responsible for the advertised product. Once the client has been brought to the point where he realizes that inadequately written texts can mean a significant competitive disadvantage in the market, it will be necessary to find the root cause of the shortcomings in his specific case and make the necessary adjustments. This is no easy task, considering the difficulties of quality control in this field, and the lack of objective criteria. But the client has at least been brought part of the way when he realizes that cost and delivery speed are not the only, and not even the most important, factors to be considered when assessing the quality and reliability of a translation service.

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