

From Theory to Practice - A New Perspective on the Ethics of Translation

Joseph Lambert

University of Hull, UK

jaltranslation(a)gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Is there a “right” way to go about the act of translation? In what ways are we responsible for the texts we translate? How can we account for the competing interests at work when we translate a text? In this thesis I set about answering these questions by synthesising ideas drawn from ethical theory, hermeneutics and translation studies and bring them into critical conversation. In so doing, I aim to expand understandings of ethics within translation studies and address the questions of representation and intervention that accompany all acts of translation. More specifically, I seek to move us beyond purely deontological ethics – the idea of imposing a universally-right way to go about the task – which represent the most common means of framing translation ethics. While a number of scholars have stated their belief that there is no implicitly correct way to translate in all situations, none to date have established an ethical framework that can sustain the lack of specific guidance that results from moving beyond deontological methods. My thesis seeks to rectify this by advancing a new conception of ethics based around an ethical theory founded on the notion of subjectivity: egoism. In its various forms, this theory sets self-interest as the foundation for morality, arguing that people should, or indeed can only, take their own interests into account in an ethical context. I seek to develop a diacritical ethics of self-interest for translators. This places ultimate value in the translator’s own idiosyncratic reading but calls for a judicious consideration of the various challenges and interests at stake, requiring the translator to be able to advocate for their choices.

Throughout the thesis, and in tandem with my examination of these theoretical developments, I maintain a commitment to placing my discussions within a practical context. I question the commensurability of existing and newly-developed theoretical conceptions with the concrete, “real-life” practice of translation by calling upon a range of examples taken not only from my own professional experience as a translator, but also from the work of other translators and from the wider context of cultural transfer and linguistic mediation. I oscillate between overarching ethical causes and specific, concrete translational guidance and ultimately seek to embed my theoretical developments within translation practice as a whole. I bring the thesis to a close by modifying a real-world translation code of ethics in line with the conclusions drawn in previous chapters. These modifications reflect my newly-developed framework of ethics and, when the theories I have employed are reflected back upon codes more widely, they also uncover the situated, non-neutral nature of these documents.

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